TALES OF SYMPHONIA
SUCCESSORS OF HOPE
Takumi Miyajima

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希望を継ぐモノ

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A NAMCO-BANDAI GAMES ORIGINAL NOVEL

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INTRODUCTION

Background Story

17-year-old Lloyd is a young man who has lost his mother and father at an early age and was raised by a dwarf who adopted him. Together with his childhood friends, Colette and Genis, he sets out on a journey to their world of Sylvarant, which is on the verge of destruction, and restores it to the lush and peaceful world it was centuries ago. Colette is a member of the "Mana Lineage," and holds the key to regenerating the world. Believing that their world will be saved once Colette transforms into an angel, Lloyd and the others surmount countless obstacles. However, Lloyd begins to have concerns about this process as the true nature of their world slowly becomes clear. The regeneration of the world of Sylvarant actually equates to the decline of another world, Tethe'alla, as their fates are intrinsically linked—for one to flourish, the other must be sacrificed. But can this somehow be avoided...? As Colette gradually loses her humanity and begins to transform into an angel, these sorts of questions become more and more urgent...

CHARACTERS

KRATOS AURION

A mysterious swordsman who identifies himself as a mercenary. His skill with a sword is topnotch, and he joins the journey of world regeneration to act as a bodyguard for Colette. He has sharp, penetrating eyes, perhaps because of the countless battles he has had to face in his lifetime.

LLOYD IRVING

Found abandoned in a forest while he was an infant, Lloyd has been raised by his adoptive father, a dwarf. He is respected by all for his agile mind and skill at making quick decisions, but his grades in school leave much to be desired. With a tendency to show off, he tries to be as cool as possible, but he's actually a kind spirit who puts his heart into what he does.

COLETTE BRUNEL

Lloyd's childhood friend. Though she is dignified and graceful during her ceremonies as the Chosen, she is normally a clumsy, absent-minded and easygoing girl. But she has a strong inner will, and is definitely no sheltered little girl. Rather, in emergencies she acts boldly, and bravely works to help her friends.

GENIS SAGE

Lloyd's childhood friend. The best at his studies in the entire village, Genis is also an excellent mage. Perhaps because he is so clever, he is also quick to determine what he's capable of and what he's not, and is quick to give up when something seems beyond him. For such a young boy, he is like an adult in many ways, and deftly balances both childlike and grown-up personality traits.

RAINE SAGE

Lloyd and Colette's teacher and Genis's older sister. She goes along with the others on the journey of world regeneration, and her considerable knowledge about archaeology and magitechnology are a boon for her companions. She is a cool, composed lady, but prefers comfortable clothing and tends to wear clothes that are more masculine. She is well-liked among fellow villagers and her students for her beauty and her fresh personality.

SHEENA FUJIBAYASHI

An assassin sworn to kill Colette. However, Sheena is quite clumsy for an assassin, and fails at her task time and time again. Her personality is direct and upright in all things, and she is very frank about her own emotions. It seems that she has a very complex reason for wanting to kill Colette. She is a summoner, and uses cards to fight.

REGAL BRYANT

A prisoner of Tethe'alla. He committed a great sin in the past and has his hands bound. As a result, his fighting style centralizes around kicks. He usually keeps a dark demeanor. He doesn't usually speak, but when he does, his words tend to carry a lot of weight.

PRESEA COMBATIR

When Presea wanted to do wood chopping for her sick father, she started wearing an Exsphere, unaware of its negative effects on her body. She was originally a bright-eyed, carefree girl, but the Exsphere has caused her to lose her humanity and become cold and withdrawn.

ZELOS WILDER

A playboy and constant wanderer with no fixed job. An unparalleled flirt with a smooth tongue, he can often be found hitting on girls, but his advances are always taken with a grain of salt. However, despite his easygoing attitude, it seems that he is shouldering a great responsibility.

RICHTER ABEND

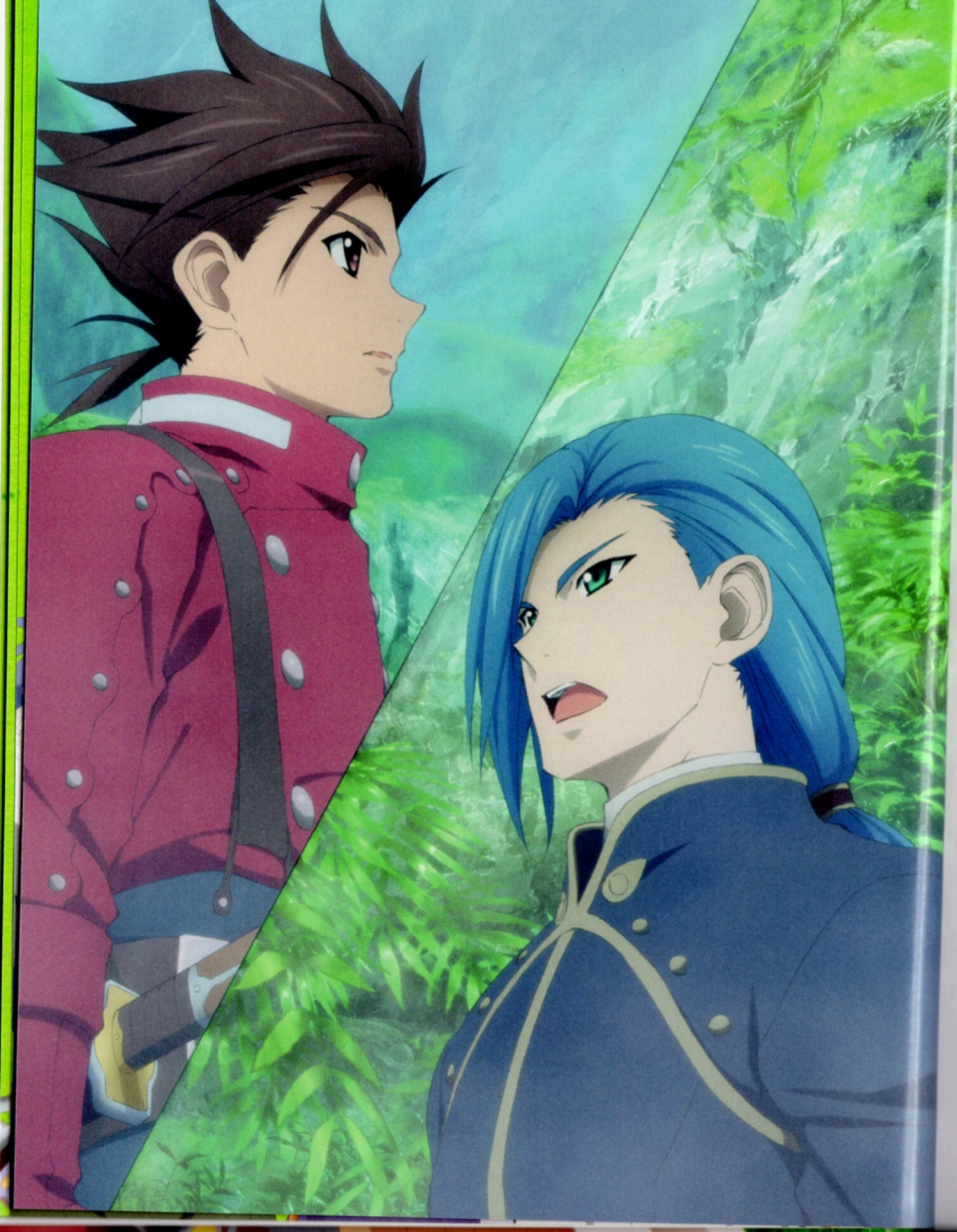
Richter is searching for the Ratatosk Core for unknown reasons. Sarcastic to a point, he is relentless in the pursuit of his goal. He meets Emil on his quest to find the Core, and while he's disgusted to see such a cowardly character and passive attitude from him, he puts himself at his service.

MARTA LUALDI

Marta is a girl who lost her mother when the Great Tree rampaged throughout the world. Determined and unafraid to make her voice known, she is not satisfied unless she can think of things in absolutes.

EMIL CASTAGNIER

He lost his parents in the Blood Purge that occurred in the town of Palmacosta. He has a straightforward personality, and an innocence that leads him to believe anything he is told.



PROLOGUE

序章

The figure of a familiar friend displayed on the multi dimensional screen, illuminating and brightening the corners of the control room itself.

A static flare and the occasional hiss distorts the figure on the screen due to the great distance being travelled by the signal—distance that was growing ever longer by the second, in a vast, universal emptiness, aboard an ark bound for the ends of the known world itself.

On this ark, Kratos Aurion spoke to the projected image of Yuan Ka-Fai, a friend and former comrade. "I trust you have been well?"

"'Well' is a relative term. But I'm still alive."

Kratos smiled.

"You're the same as ever."

"As are you. Well? What's the current status of Derris Kharlan?"

"Nothing's changed. If it had, we'd have found shelter by now."

Indeed. This ark–Derris-Kharlan–slipped from Mother Earth's gravitational sphere and was heading into the vastness of deep space. In the past, Derris-Kharlan had served as a base for the celestial organization known as Cruxis. Situated above Mother Earth, its sole purpose was to act as a vessel to supply the goddess Martel with vast amounts of Mana.

And yet there was far more to the situation at hand. Mother Earth herself had been split effectively into two worlds by human hands, each fitted with a Mana-draining system.

After a long 4,000 years, the great strain that had been placed on the world had come to an end. The angels of Cruxis who had brought forth the strain set sail on a long journey aboard the ark Derris-Kharlan under the leadership of Kratos. It was a search for a place to call home that had no real destination. In another sense, it was also a means of penance for the angels who had twisted the world and caused the people to suffer so.

"Enough pleasantries. Or are you going to tell me you're calling just to say 'hi', like a concerned mother?" asked Kratos. Yuan shook his head.

"Not this time, sadly." Yuan grinned, then turned gravely serious almost as quickly.

"There's something important I want to talk to you about. Martel needs our help again." By this he meant of course not the original Martel—the woman who was kept alive for ages, and poured mana directly into Derris-Kharlan—but the Martel who had been newly born as a spirit.

"What's the situation?" Kratos asked gravely.

"As you know, the World Tree was brought into being, and Martel was appointed to be its guardian. However, a strange force is now blocking the flow of mana, making it so that the mana that the tree brings forth has nowhere to go."

Kratos' brow furrowed. This was bad news indeed.

The circumstances behind how the world came to be divided are a tale in themselves, but here's the short version: The World Tree that provided the world with mana withered away, and there was no longer enough mana to support the world as it was. As a result, the world effectively was divided into two halves, with a relationship between them much like the two ends of an hourglass: one half in which mana was abundant, and one in which mana had all but dried up entirely.

But with the birth of a new World Tree—which provided mana—it appeared as though the crisis was solved. All was right with the world again… until now. For if the mana produced by the tree isn't cycled properly, the balance will once again crumble, and the earth would be plunged into darkness and perpetual chaos.

"This cannot be! The tree spirit can circulate the mana produced by the tree to the rest of the world, can it not?" Kratos banged a fist on the nearby terminal, his hands quivering with a cold rage.

"Therein lies the problem. Martel's time in this world is yet shallow. She may not be nearly developed enough as a spirit to solve the problem at hand with her power alone."

Yuan cleared his throat, transfixed in thought, his expression grave as death.

"Or perhaps, her power is limited because she was once a human. If that's the case, I dread how much she will have to suffer before she becomes a full spirit. We must have some way of helping her."

"Don't be so naïve, Yuan. Remember: she is not the Martel we once knew. The prayers of the Chosen, who lost their lives over Martel and the distortion in the world are yet—"

"Don't you think I know that? Regardless, the situation—"

"Enough of your blathering!"

Kratos huffed and turned his back to Yuan out of sheer frustration. He could always tell when Yuan was about to go off on a tirade, and though he might have able to take it under other circumstances, he was in no mood. He knew it rude of him but would rather suffer the consequences than suffer Yuan's endless babbling.

"How dare you!" Spat Yuan, taking a step forward confrontationally. "Pardon me for taking time out of your busy schedule to save the world from crisis. Or does that even matter to you?"

"Of course it matters. I'm just tired of arguing rhetoric with you. Your sentiments alone mean nothing. Do you have a plan or not?"

Yuan looked as if he was about to speak, but in the end bitterly swallowed his words, at an utter loss of words for a retort. In this light, Yuan reminded Kratos of how he was in the days when the two still traveled together as comrades, memories springing forth in his mind.

Long, long ago, Kratos and Yuan were friends who strove to save the world from certain destruction, along with Martel and Mithos.

But time went on, and the two of them found their lives beginning to diverge from one another. In order to revive the once-lost Martel, Kratos and Yuan consented with Mithos to divide the world, burdening it with a system that was warped and cruel for ages and ages.

Back when Yuan was living as an angel of Cruxis, he had shut the door to his emotions, and performed terrible acts. But this was done out of a selfless desire to release Martel and Mithos from their warped and twisted existence, freeing them once and for all.

And now, he could say he accomplished just that.

The original Martel wanted nothing more than to save the world, and met her end doing so. The spirit Martel was soon born in her place. In a manner of speaking, this act had emancipated Yuan's very soul as well from the prison he had made for it with his own hands. But in the Yuan that stood before him, Kratos saw his friend as he remembered him: cold as steel.

But just then, Kratos recalled a spirit he had met on one of his travels. "Ratatosk…"

Yuan raised an eyebrow at Kratos' mere whispered mention of that name.

"Ratatosk? You mean, the spirit Ratatosk? If I remember correctly, he's the tree spirit that you and Mithos went to ask for his cooperation. Whatever became of him?"

"Hmm, I wonder as well. What do you suppose happened to him once the former World Tree withered away?"

"If the tree he was born to protect died, it would follow that he did as well, wouldn't it?"

"I wouldn't be so sure. Though the great tree itself would have indeed perished, surely its seeds would have lived on."

True enough, the seeds did live on, and thus a new tree began to grow. It was because of these very seeds that the world survived the crisis it was in the midst of.

"Is that so? If everything the tree bears in its lifetime is considered part of the tree itself, then it would follow that Ratatosk is still alive as well. But then that would mean that there are two tree spirits still alive at the same time."

"Indeed. Two spirits alive in one tree. I can't say for sure, but I believe that this is somehow behind the heart of the situation."

"Indeed. We must investigate immediately."

Yuan motioned to end the transmission, but then suddenly stopped. While Kratos remained transfixed in thought, Yuan eventually mustered up the courage to ask him something, a look of deep seriousness on his face.

"Aren't you going to even ask about your son?"

"Should I? I assume all is well unless you're going to tell me otherwise."

"I swear, I can't tell if you have absolute faith in him or if you're just as frigid as a tundra inside!"

Yuan smiled wryly, but maintained a look of grave seriousness.

"But I'll have you know, Kratos. Depending on how things go, we may yet need to ask Lloyd for help again. Count on it."

"Lloyd, you say?"

"If the spirit of the tree is indeed behind the peril the world is in, it would follow that we would need the power of one who has been blessed. The spirit, Martel, chose Lloyd, and bestowed her blessing unto him. Were Martel to require assistance yet again, she would likely call upon Lloyd."

"So we'll have to involve him again, will we…"

Kratos gave a defeated sigh. For indeed it was his son, Lloyd Irving, who along with his compatriots, returned the world that Kratos and his friends had put a terrible burden to its proper form, and helped cause the great seed of the new tree to grow. How shameful he felt it that he might have to force his son to make up for his own shortcomings!

"Why is it you appear so concerned? Lloyd is the only one who can save our world. Even if he does have to get involved in this crisis, whatever may happen, I know he has the strength to overcome it."

Yuan appeared proud, as if he were actually the target of his own praise. Although he and Lloyd had originally been enemies, much had changed since then. Kratos sighed deeply with a resigned shrug.

"Looks like you're the one who has 'absolute faith' in the boy."

"Well of course. He is the son of my stubborn old friend, after all."

And with that, despite it all, Kratos found himself unable to resist smiling at his friend's ill-timed humor. Some things never really do change.

CHAPTER 1

FRAGMENTS OF HOPE

希望の欠片

"Mana is, according to the King, the cornerstone of connection to life."

A drop of sweat falls with a soft splatter onto the word "king", fading as it spreads and sinks into the dull-colored parchment of the old book. Aster Laker wipes his sweating forehead with the sleeve of his uniform.

It was unbelievably hot, so hot that the words on the page all seemed like gibberish to him.

As always with early spring, Sybak should have been somewhat chilly this time of year, with a cold front blowing in from the north. But contrary to the turn of the seasons as usual, yesterday's temperature had set new records for the season and the heat of summer's peak continued its unnatural trudge into today.

Aster suddenly felt faint. Losing his balance where he was sitting atop the stairs, he dropped the book resting on his knee.

"Ah!"

Aster had been reading important documents from the Imperial Research Academy. Had it been something that could be easily damaged, the librarian would have prohibited it from leaving the reference room. Aster reached out almost instinctively to grab the falling book in a panic, but just as quickly found the world spinning around him as he tumbled from atop the long staircase.

Aster found his mind reeling as the scenery spiraled in front of him. "Is this how the great scholar meets his end?!" He thought. "And with so much left unfinished!"

But just then, in that instant, as though blinded with white light from another world, he felt the

epiphany he'd been waiting for his whole life. Mana. He understood the true essence of mana!

Alas, his cruel fate would be that he perish before being able to explain to the world his great revelation. It is often said that your life flashes before your eyes just before dying. Aster's mind, however, was solely fixed on the book he had been reading just moments ago, before his untimely tumble down the stairs, where oblivion would surely await him.

"I'm going to hit the bottom and squish like a frog—and then surely croak! Oh, damn my brilliant wit at such an inappropriate time!" He mused, believing himself a genius to the very end as he spiraled downward further. "The ground is close upon me now! The end is surely nigh! I'm doomed! This is the—"

But suddenly, as his mind reeled and he braced himself for what he believed was to be his doom, another arm reached under his own, stopping Aster from falling. He teetered forward a bit and calmly adjusted his balance, as if nothing had ever happened.

"Oh, thank you kind sir! To whom do I owe my life?"

Looking up at his savior's face, Aster saw his friend, Richter Abend, and immediately stuck out his tongue.

"Oh. It's just Richter. What a joy," he said flatly.

"Well, that's a fine how do you do!"

"Y—YOU'RE a fine how do you do!"

Richter's face was bitter and scornful as a snarling dog. He was the kind of person who was so uptight he couldn't take a joke to save his life, even one as lame and nonsensical as Aster's was. It was like he just wore a mask with a permanent look of displeasure on his face, and Aster longed for the day in which he could just rip it off once and for all.

"Enough of your stupid word games! I came here looking for Rilena."

"Is that so? Then it must be almost noon."

"Almost? It's already well past noon. Is that what you were doing falling down the stairs? Trying to go back in time through centrifugal force? "

Richter grinned smugly, while a confused Aster turned his gaze toward the clock on the wall.

"Oh no, Rilena's gonna kill me!"

"You're damn right she will! She sent me to come get you, and if it comes to that in the first place, you can bet you're in for it!"

"I've always known that about you. There's two things you don't have the guts to say 'no' to: crying children and Rilena."

"Human women are just hysterical! I haven't a clue how to deal with them."

"What does it matter to you, anyways? I'm the one she's mad at."

"If you know what you did wrong, then maybe you should do something about it in the first place!"

Aster tried his best to keep up, but Richter was unmatched in his nagging and arguing, and ultimately gulped down the last word to Aster's dismay.

Rilena Malory was a colleague of Aster and Richter's. The three of them were carrying out their research on spirits at the Sybak Imperial Research Academy, Tethe'alla's academic capital. If the Academy could be called the brains of Tethe'alla, then the Elemental Research Laboratory was its cerebrum. And currently, Elemental Research was more important than ever in combating the abnormal weather that was springing up on a global scale.

After a long 4000 years the world was at last as it should have been, thanks to Collette and the World Regeneration. But 4000 years is no short amount of time by any stretch of the imagination. Due to the great distortion brought on by human hands over such a long period of time, the life of the planet itself was surely affected. The Imperial Research Academy posed the question of this "distortion" being a manifestation of the abnormal weather, which of course raised the question as to how to get rid of it. The existence of spirits was in of itself determined to be a viable method to that end. After all, if the spirits had the power to split the Earth in two, then surely they had the power to restore it. The conclusion reached was that this spirit power was necessary to clear the distortion once and for all.

"You're so focused on your research that you're not eating, and Rilena's worried about you. What you're doing is real commendable and all, but Rilena's worried about you."

Richter stared through his spectacles as if his gaze was fixed on a helpless younger brother. Had that been truly the case, Richter would have had his hands full with a brother like Aster. They were only two years apart. But from Aster's point of view, he would have rather fallen right on his head and died after falling down those steps than suffer with an older brother like Richter.

"Well, maybe it's because I know how worried Rilena and you are over me that I can stay so focused on my research!"

"Aster!"

"Just think about the situation we're in. You heard, right? People are saying a drought will come and destroy the spring vegetable harvest at this rate."

Aster's words blanketed Richter's face with gloom. Richter knew he was right.

"Yeah... I heard."

"Sylvant already has a food shortage. People would riot in the streets if there was a drought."

"Riot? They'd starve to death long before then."

"And that's why we need to find out the cause of this abnormal weather as soon as we can."

"That may be. But pushing yourself to exhaustion is going to do you more harm than good."

"That's where you and Rilena come in!" said Aster with great gusto, but Richter instead shot him an ice cold gaze that pierced through even the ungodly heat that plagued the day.

"Relax! I'm trying to tell you I discovered something incredible!"

"Sounds great and all, but it's burning up in this room! If we're going to talk, let's take it out to the dining hall. We're going to dehydrate ourselves if we stay stuck in this sauna any longer."

Well, there was one thing he and Aster agreed on, at least.

"You know, you might be right. Before you showed up I was feeling kinda dizzy, actually."

"You idiot!"

And just like that, Aster was getting yelled at again. He wondered why Richter would fly into a rage over someone else's health. It's not like it was his problem. No wonder people initially tended to mistaking him as cold-hearted and just plain scary.

Then again, maybe there was too much truth to that to call it "mistaking."

"Anyway, come to the dining hall. I'll get you so hydrated you'll be fit to be crammed in a specimen jar and taken to the lab!"

"Hang on! I need to return these documents or the librarian will hang me out to dry!"

"I'll take care of it for you. Just hurry up and get to the dining hall already!"

"But I need to clean up here first!"

"I told you I'll take care of it! Now amscray!"

"Real funny how you're playing the Samaritan now, but when I actually ask you for a favor, I can't get the time of day!"

"Well this time is… special."

"Is it? Then gimme a hand here, and then we'll go to the dining hall together."

As Aster said this, he began picking up the scattered documents and books off the floor. Richter breathed a sigh before following suit.

"How overly considerate of you."

"That's my line. I swear, you're like an overprotective mother, you know that?"

"You're cruisin' for a bruisin', kid."

Richter's hand was trembling as he picked up a book. Aster thought it would be better to keep his

mouth shut to keep from enraging Richter any further.

"Come on, it was a joke."

Aster immediately felt bad after his careless remark. But only just a little.

***

Just as the lunch break ended, researchers shuffled out from the dining hall. Flustered, Richter and Aster split off in the hallway to yield to the mass of lab coats passing through.

"Kinda makes you feel like a VIP, doesn't it?"

Aster chuckled audibly to himself.

"God I hate these swine."

"Richter, that's so rude!"

"Yeah, you're right. I wouldn't even put pigs on the same level as these creeps."

"You're like a kid who's just trying to get people angry for attention, I swear."

Aster could sense Richter's contemptuous glare, but decided to pay no mind to it. When you hang around Richter long enough you learn when to let certain things go. But then, it happened.

"Stupid Half-elf."

A researcher walked past spouting these words. Aster reacted as if by instinct, grabbing him by the collar.

"What the hell!? Let me go!"

"What did you say just now?"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me! You say something about a stupid Half-elf?"

"So what if I did? What are you gonna do about it, kid?"

"Hmph! Stupid humans!"

Saying this right in the man's face, Aster gently pushed him away without batting an eye.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, that's right! I'm just mimicking what you said. You don't even realize what you're saying, throwing around words about race like that, do you? Joking or not, is that any way for an Imperial Academy Researcher to be talking? Why would you even say such a thing? What's YOUR problem?"

"Aster, just drop it."

Richter was trying to put a stop to all of it, but Aster had already set the best skill in his arsenal: the

"Ignore Richter" skill.

"Tell me now. If you can't answer, you can file it to me in a report later."

"Sh--shut up! You people walk around like you own the place! Smart-ass Half-elves."

"Oh, 'smart-ass Half-elves', huh? So rather than look down at Richter you deride an entire race? While you're looking down on us Half-elves, how about telling me just what it is you're comparing us to that makes us look so 'inferior?' Give me an example, mister researcher! Have you uncovered the main cause? Have you considered individual environmental factors?"

"Wh--Who gives a crap about any of that!?"

The researcher made his escape through the throng of curious onlookers. Aster puffed his cheeks.

"What the hell? Anytime you ask someone questions about why they criticize Half-elves, they turn tail and run."

"Looked more like an inquisition than a question, if you ask me."

"Or a confrontation, maybe? Whatever you want to call it."

Aster grinned. Richter let out a flabbergasted sigh.

"That was my fight to begin with, you know?"

"I know. I stepped in because I figured all you would do is ignore them or at best mutter 'stupid pigs' under your breath or something. That doesn't make any difference. Plus it just plain made me mad."

The two of them walked shoulder-to-shoulder into the dining hall. It seemed like they had already stopped serving the lunch menu by the time they got there. Aster wanted something with pork, so he ordered the Pork Sautee. Richter, for a brief moment, had a sour expression on his face before returning to his usual arrogant smile. He then said, "I'll have the same."

Elves, Humans, and Half-elves. The term "person" could be referring to any of these three races in this world. Among these, only the Half-elves were continually persecuted since ancient times, and for reasons unknown. Their numbers had been few at first, but they had skill, longevity, and a close kinship to humans on their side. And yet they still faced seemingly endless persecution.

It was the same in the Imperial Research Academy. Just a few months prior, Half-elf researchers were confined to the basement facilities as if they were under house arrest. Ascending to the surface facilities required certain formal procedures, and most Half-elves were pressured into harsh working environments. That changed after the World Regeneration. The Tethe'alla royal family ordered an improvement of labor conditions, which granted Half-elf researchers the same rights as their human counterparts. Even so, many Humans refused to accept the sudden change, and Half-elves faced various shades of discrimination when they made their way to the surface.

Richter was one of those Half-elves confined to the basement. Elemental Research in those days was focused on the field of artificial spirits, so standard Elemental Research got the short end of

the stick. The same applied to the researchers, and as you probably guessed the Half-elves were ultra low priority in terms of how they were treated. Despite this hostile environment, Richter tirelessly published thesis after thesis. The theme of Richter's research was ahead of its time, but went unpraised by the majority of his colleagues. Aster was the exception. He began to frequent the basement, spending his time researching with Richter until the wee hours of the night.

And even since that time, the target of their research was the same as ever.

What exactly was the Spirit of the Giant Kharlan Tree?

If the Giant Tree were to be resurrected, could it bring an end to this cycle of flourishing and withering that the world was currently in the midst of? This is what the two were contemplating with their countless hours of research.

Of course, the idea of a tree that could infinitely produce mana was often written off as a fairy-tale. Many found it laughable, thinking the mere concept blurred the line between fantasy and reality. The Imperial Research Academy in those days was divided on the topic of whether or not the Giant Tree even existed. But amongst them, Aster and Richter were sure of it.

Aster held tightly to the theory that all things in creation have a Spirit, including the Giant Tree. He pondered what became of that Spirit after the Tree had died. Did it disappear? Could it be resurrected? It could very well save the world from all the suffering caused by the loss of mana. Obviously Aster couldn't do it with his power alone, but it could hold the key to saving people the world over. With that in mind, Aster and Richter continued their research together... until the World Regeneration occurred at last.

When Aster heard that the World Regeneration had sprouted a new Giant Tree, he was beyond ecstatic. With that, it appeared the world was saved. And since the Giant Tree existed just as Aster had predicted, then the Spirit of the Tree must exist as well.

The new Tree, to distinguish it from the old one, came to be called "The World Tree". This World Tree had a spirit whose name was said to be Martel. Naming it after the goddess Martel made it sound strong, reliable—like the embodiment of hope itself. Aster and Richter immediately commenced their research on the spirit Martel. That was about a month ago.

Looking at his plate of Pork Sautee, Aster called out to a female chef standing in the inner part of the open kitchen. She replied with a nonchalant but inquisitive "Yes?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't the side salad usually have more vegetables than this?"

"Sorry about that. You know how it's unusually hot these days? That heat wave has made the vegetables a lot pricier."

"Ah, of course. Thanks."

Aster held back the sudden feeling of gloom that sank in and nodded with a smile. The chef was starting mysteriously in his direction. Aster hastily claimed a table, then Richter sat facing him.

"What's wrong, Aster?"

"Just the lack of vegetables."

"What? Come on, you heard what she said, didn't you?"

"I did."

Aster stared at the fist-sized glass bowl of coleslaw.

"Since this is the Imperial Research Academy, we get preferential food service. So if we're getting this paltry amount of vegetables, just imagine how few the average person is getting."

Richter scowled.

"So what? Are you saying we shouldn't eat them out of guilt?"

"No, I'm saying we shouldn't waste them out of guilt. But it can't go on like this. There's got to be something we can do."

Aster wolfed down his salad.

"Do you think there's anything we can do?"

"The Giant Tree Spirit..." said Aster, unconsciously clutching the amulet around his neck with his left hand. "Now is the time to present our findings from our research, don't you think?"

"But fieldwork on Martel is prohibited!"

"No, I'm talking about the Giant Tree."

"We've lost the Giant Tree of Kharlan, though."

"But since there was a spirit for the World Tree, there should be one for the Giant Tree."

"But the spirit protecting it was one with the Tree, right? So if the Tree dies, than so does the spirit."

"You were the one who proposed that something was born for the spirit to protect."

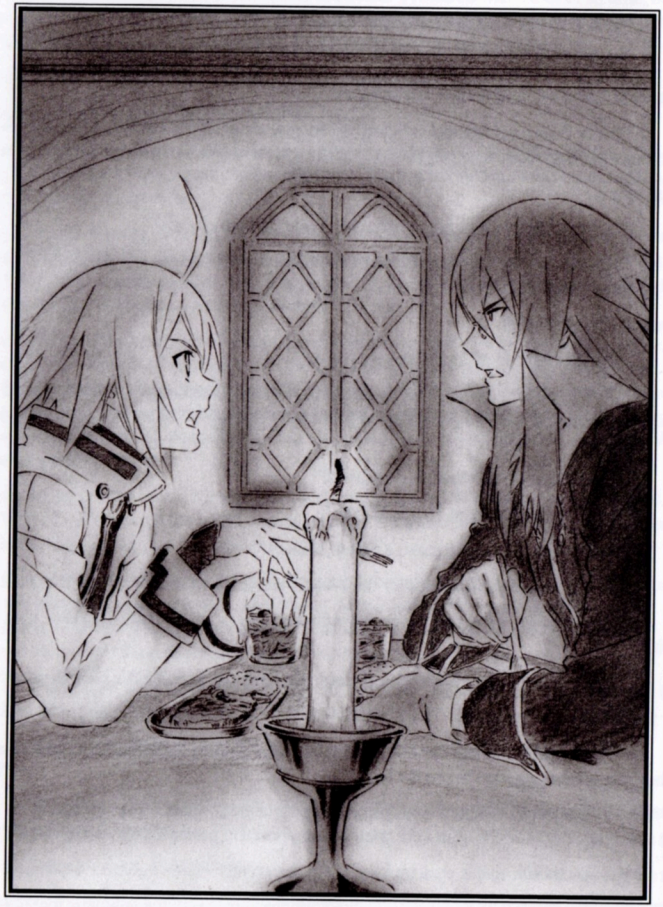
Richter looked shamefaced.

"True enough, I think all life begins with spirits. But my theory is that a spirit disappears when the thing it was supposed to protect does."

"That's just it!" Without even thinking about it, Aster found himself pointing his fork straight at Richter. "What if the object the spirit was supposed to protect never disappeared?"

Richter sat with his mouth agape, eyes looking grave, apparently stunned at Aster's question.

And that was it. It was what he had just discovered only moments ago: the epiphany that was sparked by that single sentence he read in that old book in the research room.



"Mana is, according to the King, the connection to all corners of life. I think that's how it went."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was in a book I was reading, 'Kharlan's Structure and Function' I believe."

"I've read that book myself, but it's just a summary of very general information about the Giant Tree. Besides, it's an old book based on misinformation."

"Yeah, I thought it was probably just a misinterpretation. Could it actually be 'Mana is King of all life'? Is that referring to the spirit of the Giant Tree of Kharlan? Or to the King?"

"The King... of Mana?"

"Right. Mana existed when the world was split into two. So the King of Mana—that is to say, the governing spirit of mana, still existed. That's the spirit of the Giant Kharlan Tree, the one we were thinking of."

It was a wild idea, but Aster was self-confident. It had something to do with the abnormal weather patterns the world was dealing with too. Even if it was a reaction to the two split worlds rejoining, the climate change defied the laws of nature. In that case, was there a different cause for the strange weather?

And this is what brought mana into the picture.

The cause of the strange weather patterns were thought to be the source of this "distortion"—in other words, the disruption in the flow of mana. The World Tree gives birth to mana. Mana is the mirror that reflects the world. Every feature, every contour and detail in existence, is all shaped by mana. And somewhere along the way, this mirror got distorted.

But this "distortion" didn't exist during the time of the Great Kharlan Tree. Mana is not energy that deteriorates over time. Aside from the production of mana, there had to be some difference between the Giant Tree and the World Tree.

"The spirit of the Giant Kharlan Tree had the role of regulating mana. Or perhaps, what we thought of as the spirit of the Giant Kharlan Tree was really the spirit of mana. Does that make sense?"

With deep thought resounding through his head, Richter let out a weighted murmur.

Despite it all, Aster had to admit Richter had exactly what you'd want in a partner: quick comprehension.

"In that case—" began Aster, but he was quickly cut off.

"Don't get in over your head just yet. Remember, we don't know anything, and this theory represents the best-case scenario we have in our heads. Though I'm not denying it is, if nothing else, a possibility."

"I know that. It's just a hypothesis. And like any other hypothesis, it needs to be tested!"

Aster reached for the amulet. In it were engraved the magic words his mother taught him as a child.

"Courage is the magic that makes dreams come true…"

Aster gripped the amulet tightly, staring intently at Richter.

"Time to do some fieldwork. We're going to look for the Spirit of the Giant Tree."

"Don't be ridiculous! The World Regeneration may be complete, but we're not exactly living in a utopia here either. Monsters are increasing in number and it isn't safe. We don't have the funding to hire mercenaries for protection. And we can't even say for sure whether the thing we're looking for exists to begin with, so asking Director Schneider for funding is out of the question."

"We can convince him, I'm sure of it. You'll help me out, right? You're the only one who I can count on to believe me!"

"I will. But if and only if you convince him."

"Richter!"

"And that's not all. I have more conditions. We both spend so much time researching that we haven't the foggiest idea how to even defend ourselves. We'll need to at least learn how to handle a single weapon, because this is isn't any ordinary sort of field work."

"Fine, then I'll practice! Does that make you satisfied?"

Richter nodded, albeit reluctantly.

How could he mind? Richter himself would surely see things his way if they did a little more research on Giant Tree based on their hypothesis, and this in turn could only bode well for their upcoming field work.

"Well, first things first. We need to conduct more research on the Giant Tree and compile a report," said Aster, but Richter was transfixed in thought, eyes distant.

"The name of the king was written in that book, if I remember correctly. Rata...."

"Ratatosk. I think it went something like 'Ratatosk, nestled by the tree.'"

Indeed, the King's name was Ratatosk. But there was still so much left uncertain. If Ratatosk was truly a spirit, then what kind of spirit was it? Where was it? What kind of power did it have? And what was it really after?

Aster could barely sit still with these thoughts racing through his on his mind, as he swallowed them down with the rest of his pork sauté. When he looked up though, he noticed that Richter was also frantically trying to wolf down his meal as quickly as possible.

"Whoa, where's the fire, Richter? Slow down!"

"We need to gather up all the data on Ratatosk that we possibly can."

Aster chuckled. "Well, looks like someone's all gung-ho about this all of a sudden!"

Richter seemed transfixed for a moment, and then, for the first time in a long time, broke out into a warm smile.

"Well, I do have a friend who's counting on me!" And he knew it was true.

CHAPTER 2

JOURNEY FROM THE CITY OF THE WIND

風の街から

The scorching sun was enough to fry skin. There was no wind out, just the burning sun hanging high in the sky and baking the dry earth.

"Looks like the wind really stopped," Raine Sage murmured, as if confirming to herself what she already knew was true.

The Asgard region was situated over a steep and treacherous mountain path called Hakonesia Peak. The wind blowing through the plateau was much appreciated by tourists who sought refuge from the intense burning heat of the summer, but that was before the World Regeneration.

The wind was gone. And there was no telling if it would ever come back. The air seemed to hang perpetually, stagnant and dry.

The writing was all over the wall: the world was slowly coming to an end. In the Palmacosta region where they had dropped by earlier, the main fishery seemed particularly strained for resources, probably due to the change in climate.

Doing her best to shade herself from the brutal sunlight with her palms, Raine continued to move on and saw a windmill, now deathly still, between the canyons. That windmill was a waymarker that indicated the location of the city of Asgard, her target destination.

Could the man she was looking for even be in that city?

Would they even find a trace of him?

Despite the reality that she may be involved in a fruitless search, Raine tried to assuage her own anxiety by remembering what the very person she'd been searching for had taught her—that no

matter what happens, you can never give up.

To her right: cliffs. To her left: rocky mountains exposing their rugged surfaces. Even in this harsh environment, the ancient ruins that could be seen around the area still were a popular attraction for many, drawing in people the world over. Raine had visited the area before as well, but for research purposes.

"Raine!"

Raine looked up upon hearing a familiar voice and saw her little brother, Genis Sage, running through the entranceway to the City of Asgard. He had probably noticed her walking over from the heights. Raine trotted enthusiastically over to where Genis had called from.

"Genis!"

"Raine! Long time no see!"

Genis jumped into her chest as he finished his sentence. He had always been a bit on the short side, and it didn't look like that was really going to change at this point.

"How've you been? Anything changed?"

"No, sadly."

"'Sadly?' Isn't no news good news? It'd be awful if you were sick or hurt!"

"I know, but…" Genis frowned, embarrassed. "I'm still not any taller."

Raine burst out into wild laughter, though Genis himself was fuming with rage.

"You think this is funny?! This is really important to me!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry!"

"'Yeah yeah' doesn't exactly sound like a sincere apology to me!" Genis fumed.

"Will you cut it out already?!"

Raine flicked her enraged brother's forehead lightly, causing Genis to fly into a rage. He came at her, feebly flailing his fists like windmills as he rushed toward her, but due to his tragically short stature, Raine subdued him easily by pressing a single hand against his forehead, keeping him at bay while Genis continued winding his fists around like a haymaker.

It had been about a month since she last saw Genis. They had gone their separate ways and promised to meet up again in Asgard. Genis was unbelievably smart, but he was still only 13 years old, and Raine, overprotective sister that she was, couldn't help but worry about him. But even Raine was no match for Genis' overzealousness, and so on his own he went.

Besides, Raine understood Genis's feelings better than anyone. This was all for his best friend, and Raine's most important pupil.

After Genis finally gave up in his feeble tantrum, he calmed himself down and poised himself to tell

Raine what it was he came for in the first place.

"Raine, there's something I want to tell you. It's about Lloyd…"

Genis walked side-by-side with Raine, conversing as they walked.

"Lloyd? Did you find anything?"

Genis shook his head gloomily. She knew it was coming, but nonetheless, Raine couldn't hide her disappointment.

There was a time in which Raine set out on the Journey of Regeneration. In those days, Lloyd had been one of her most trusted companions.

And then one day, he disappeared from his comrades.

It was without warning or notice, of his own accord, alone.

Those who knew Lloyd, knew he treasured nothing more than his comrades. And so when he just disappeared without notice, it was both shocking and heartbreaking to those that cared about him. They searched desperately for even a hint as to his whereabouts, but every search turned up empty. He was simply nowhere to be found.

"How about on your end, Raine?"

"About the same. No good leads."

"What on earth could have happened to him?"

"I wonder."

Raine couldn't help but worry about the very real possibility that Lloyd simply didn't want to be found. Disappearing without notice or trace like this simply wasn't like him, who was always so honest and straightforward in his dealings with others, never hesitant to tell anyone how he felt, for better or worse. Was he just laying low on purpose? Or, heaven forbid, had something happened to him?

They couldn't deny the latter option. But in her heart, Raine had an unwavering conviction that nothing could shake: Lloyd was still alive.

When they entered Asgard, the windmill, symbolic of the town itself, was deathly still. Genis noticed Raine staring at it and craned his neck to look up at the windmill as well.

"Harley said there's been no wind for the past three weeks."

Harley is a Half-elf who resides in Asgard. He was of great aid to Raine and her friends during the journey of the World Regeneration, and he kept in touch with them ever since. After all, the Sage siblings were also Half-elves. Kinship between them was as natural as gravity.

"I see. Is Harley doing well?"

"Yup! I arrived here two days ago, and everyone seemed to be doing well enough. Let's

see. There's the Mayor, Aisha, Linar, and… um…"

Raine noticed her little brother at loss of his words and suspected that he was hiding something from her. Genis winced, knowing he'd already said too much, and feebly trailed off in an attempt to change the subject, but Raine was already onto him.

"Genis? You're not… hiding anything from me, are you?"

"Yes! Wait, I mean, no! Wait, well, uh… there's actually a little something that I was um, going to tell you about Linar."

"Linar? What is it?"

Genis hesitated, but ultimately knew that there was no avoiding it at this point.

"Linar might have uh, discovered a new ruin."

Raine's eyes instantly grew as wide as dinner plates, and without missing a beat, grabbed Genis by the wrist and took off into an enthusiastic sprint.

"Leapin' lizards, why didn't you say so in the first place, you doofus?!"

Compelled by her inner passion for the ruins, Raine took off at almost triple her normal running speed. Off they went to Linar's house! For Genis, there was no point in even arguing. It was as good as done, and to Raine, everything else was small potatoes.

"Is Linar here!?"

Raine flung the door open, and it was long after she had started yelling when she realized she had forgotten to so much as knock. But hey, you can't unring a bell, or so Raine figured. As long as she met with Linar, the rest was small potatoes!

Linar seemed to be in the middle of his meal. He was sitting at the table along with his younger sister, Aisha. The two of them turned around, mouths agape, bread falling out of their jaws, which had run slack with sheer disbelief at Raine's apparent lack of anything resembling common sense or courtesy. But to Raine, this too was but small potatoes.

"Rai...ne?"

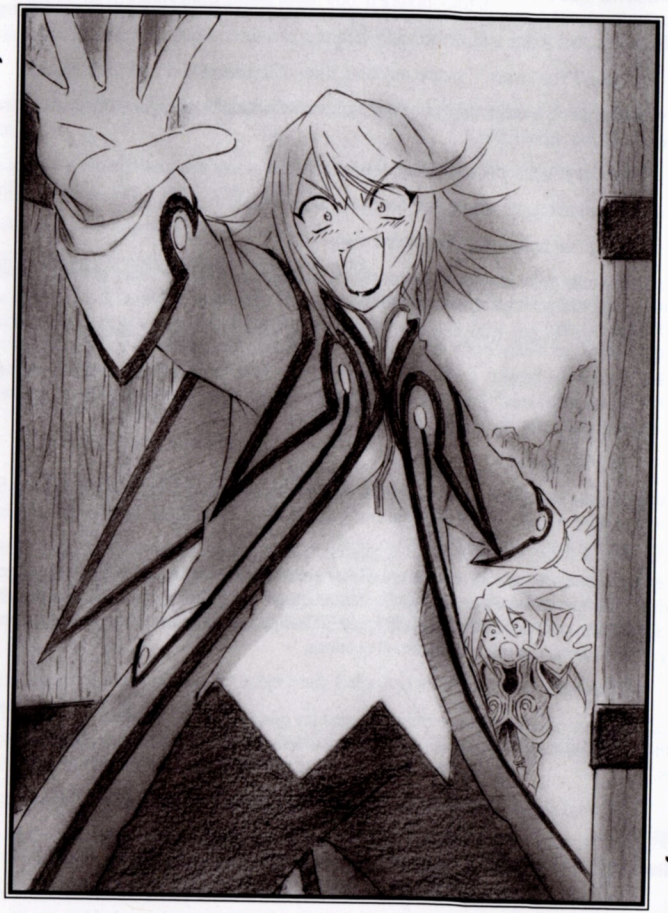
Surprised, Linar raised his husky voice and adjusted his glasses, which had fallen out of alignment due to the look of extreme shock his face had contorted into. But again, this was nothing but small potatoes.

"I heard about your new discovery! There's a new ruin, right? RIGHT?! Gimmie all the juicy details!"

Immediately, Linar's eyes widened. He sprung up on his feet immediately, almost overjoyed.

"Yes, yes, yes, Raine! It's a great discovery! I'd love for you to listen to what I've found!"

"Of course!"



Linar cleared up the dishes on the table and spread out the map of the Asgard and its surroundings in the open space. Raine came up to the table at once. Meanwhile, Aisha remained motionless, in shock at the audacity of Raine and now her brother too, but hey, details like this were as small as the potatoes that rolled on to the floor when Linar cleared the table in maniacal haste.

The map indicated the locations of numerous Balacruf Ruins which were dotted along the surroundings. At a quick glance, there seemed to be no sign that marked the location of any sort of new ruin.

"Huh. Doesn't look that different to me."

"Right you are! I actually found a clue to where the new ruin is, right here!"

With great gusto, Linar pointed out the small stone monument next to the Balacruf Mausoleum on the map.

"If I remember correctly, this stone monument was the one that had the engraving of a poem that mourned the past Balacruf Kings in their era of glory. This is amazing! I can't believe there'd be such a find in a place like this!"

"Indeed. I located an underground cavity underneath this very monument."

"No way! That's incredible!"

Quite the astonishing find indeed. Assuming they could prove it, of course.

Many details regarding the Balacruf Ruins and the Balacruf Mausoleum were yet shrouded in mystery. Whether or not there even remained ruins from that era which were yet undiscovered had been a long heated debate amongst scholars. It seemed inconceivable that one had actually been found—and in a place like this, too.

Then again, it wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility either. Balacruf Ruins did tend to run deep, deep underground.

"What are we waiting for? Let's get cracking on that field work right away!"

"I'm going with you!"

Raine felt encouraged by Linar's enthusiastic reply. If only all researchers were like this!

"All right! I'll be counting on you for guidance."

"You can count on me!"

Linar grabbed his back pack from off the table nearby and bolted out the door like the wind. Not to be left behind, Raine bolted just as quickly.

Along the way, Raine felt like she heard a faint, upset voice calling her name. But whatever it was, it was small potatoes compared to the task at hand. Probably.

Linar himself lived in the city of Asgard as a researcher. Like Harley, he and Raine became acquainted during the Journey of Regeneration, and had, along with Linar's younger sister, Aisha,

been good friends ever since. Linar specialized in researching Balacruf ruins, and when he and Raine got to talking about ruins, there was no telling when the conversation would end. Under most circumstances, anyways.

The two had been running toward the peninsula where the stone monument stood. But after a short time, Linar started to slow down. Initially, Raine would try to give encouraging pep talks to keep him going, but she eventually regained her composure and before long she was, as her pupils would say about her, in full-blown "ruins mode." Raine herself was plenty aware that she could get a bit fanatical at times, but when it came to ruins, it was a whole different plane of fanaticism entirely. As if a tremendous power welled up from within her and took her over completely, as if possessed by unknown spirits. And now she was practically leaving Linar in the dust as she raced towards the monument.

It took her almost all of her willpower to accomplish, but in the end Raine managed to curb her enthusiasm a bit and slowed her pace for Linar.

"I'm sorry," Linar said with a huff. "Guess I'm not all that cut out for field work!"

"Oh, it's just fine! I kinda got carried away back there. Sorry about that."

"Mmm, it's no trouble."

Linar's gaze was slightly downcast and his complexion was red. He looked like he had some sort of fever. Raine would have felt awful if she'd made his condition worse.

"Are you alright? Maybe we should rest for a bit."

"I'm just fine, thank you very much. I'm a man, I'll have you know! And besides, the peninsula is just around the corner."

"If you say so," said Raine, reluctantly. "But don't push yourself too hard."

Raine slowed down to let him catch up a bit. The fact that Linar was a man had nothing to do with it. Male or female, it didn't matter—when Raine was in "ruins mode," no one could match her stamina. Even after the Journey of Regeneration, she continued to keep her Exsphere equipped, which gave her even more stamina than usual.

Kratos Aurion, her former comrade, was the one who suggested keeping the Exphere equipped for a while. Despite the success of World Regeneration and the two separate worlds fusing into one, the world was still in a state of chaos. Of course, it was expected that there would be some disputes as what had been two worlds separated for 4000 years fused together at last. In order to prepare, they decided to use the power of the Exsphere to protect the new World Tree, for as long as it was deemed necessary.

Sure enough, it ended up being a wise decision. Even today, the world was warped in more ways than one.

"It seems like Asgard is having a hard time as well."

Linar looked a bit surprised when he heard Raine blurt out those words. Perhaps because she

suddenly changed the conversation.

"Genis says that the wind no longer blows there."

"Yes. That is the case."

Linar scratched his head worrisomely. It had always been a habit of his.

"Everyone's really worried. The windmill doesn't move any more. And that's not even the worst of our problems."

"What's happening?

"There's been earthquakes too. They happen all the time these days. Rumors seem to be spreading, and consequently there are fewer visitors."

"I see. Kinda hard to mark a place plagued by earthquakes as a tourist destination, I suppose. But abnormal weather conditions are breaking out all over these days."

"Yes. As a matter of fact, the tourist business has been receiving damage ever since the environment changed after the World Regeneration. Everyone thought things would change once the turbulence settled, but they underestimated the gravity of the situation. It's really quite complicated."

"Just how big are these earthquakes?"

"The shaking isn't actually too bad. There's a small one maybe once a week or so. But we're not really used to having earthquakes in this region, so everyone's really terrified."

"I see. Yeah, the Asgard region experiencing massive earthquakes is pretty unheard of."

"But what gets to me the most is the possibility that some local ruins in Asgard may have collapsed due to the earthquake."

That was definitely a possibility. Raine's expression clouded.

"Well, personal safety comes first before the preservation of the ruins these days. Even if the ruins were damaged a little, there's nothing we can really do about it anyways, right?"

The two proceeded toward the plateau. After a while, the horizon exploded into view, and they realized they were nearing the peninsula where the stone monument was.

"It feels like even the sea breeze is going to die out at this rate."

"It's completely calm. When I came here before, there were so many tiny waves that the sea looked like a mirror."

If residents from the Palmacosta region heard that, there was no doubt that they would be envious. Conversely, their see had been tumultuous for days, and hadn't even been able to go fishing.

Stones of various sizes lay around the peninsula. At a closer look, there was a roughly two-foot tall stone monument near the edge. Raine's attention focused on the monument almost immediately, and she ran in a beeline towards it.

An old poem was engraved on that stone monument. Raine leaked out an enchanted sigh as she traced the characters of the monument with her finger.

"To think that such a mediocre stone monument like this would be the key to unlocking the mysteries of past history! Hey, Linar! Tell me where you discovered the underground cavity."

Raine shouted as she looked back upon Linar, who was clumsily running to her side.

"G—give me just a second!"

Linar knelt in front the stone monument, still panting, and reached his hand into a round hole bored near the top part of it. The trick was that you could catch a sight of a full moon from this hole if you looked through it towards the sea on the night of the sacred festival, which was celebrated at the Balacruf Mausoleum. For this reason, researchers believed that use of the monument was largely ceremonial.

"So what exactly is the hole for? Is there any particular secret to it?"

Linar nodded, probing the inner contour of the hole with his fingers and stopped his hand in the direction of 2 o'clock.

"Right here. Take a look."

Raine peeked in at the area where Linar pointed out and noticed a small keyhole-like opening.

"The key that fits this hole has been discovered."

"What!?"

Linar took out a rugged key made with obsidian from his backpack. Some sort of red tag was attached to the key's handle. The engraving read "Imperial Research Academy Warehouse."

"Is that key from the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak, by any chance?"

"That's right! I knew you'd figure it out. Some while back, a researcher from the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak came to Asgard. They told me where the undiscovered ruin was and let me borrow the key under the condition that I'd return only when their excavation team had left the site permanently."

"Huh! Well anyways, let's get going!"

"With pleasure!"

Raine made room for him, and Linar inserted the key into the monument and turned it slowly. As it made a heavy sound, the ground beneath them shook, and the earth groaned. Shortly after, the shaking died down and a mossy rock near the side of the monument directly behind them started to move. A staircase in the design of Balacruf architecture appeared in its place.

"Is that it?"

Raine rushed over to the rock and stroked its mossy surface.

"The rock itself doesn't appear to be anything special. That means that the part that was in contact with the ground had been tampered with. Perhaps all the rocks and stone around the area were placed here to camouflage this door."

"Sure looks that way."

"Well, better not waste time. Let's go in."

But Linar pulled her arm and stopped Raine from going further in the chamber.

"Please wait for a moment. It seems to be untouched territory with no artificial lights. Please use this."

Linar handed out a small cylindrical item out of his bag and pushed the button on the side. The tip of the tube started to emit a pale light.

"It isn't quite a lantern, but it'll do in a pinch!"

"Definitely. Harley invented that, right? I think he called it the 'Pretty Sparkle Happy Light' or something."

There's no way that was actually the correct name, but whatever, small potatoes.

"I'll be borrowing that."

Raine began her cautious descent down the stairs, Pretty Sparkle Happy Light in hand.

Although sunlight streamed in through the entrance, it was so dark underground that illuminating their surroundings with their tiny hand light was the best they could do for a light source. Raine carefully scoured the area from the top to the bottom and began to walk along the basement wall, counting the number of steps. One side of the basement measured 20 steps. Apparently this chamber wasn't so large. Colorful murals were inscribed along the walls. They seemed to be preserved well, probably due to the fact that they haven't been exposed to the sun for a long time.

The wall painting seemed to depict a scene with the Wind Spirit, vaguely illustrating how a spirit controlling the wind came to the land of Asgard. This suggested the Spirit of the Wind was ordered to protect this place by some existence beyond their understanding.

"Is this a record from when the spirits first appeared? Supposedly, a tale about a summoned spirit and the king?"

"The people from the Imperial Research Academy mentioned something about a King too. It must be the key in finding a new spirit that has yet to be discovered. Could it be the King of spirits that they're talking about?"

"The King of spirits… could that mean Origin? No, it can't be. The existence of Origin was widely known long before this mural was made. So it just assumes that this new 'Spirit' would also be a King of sorts. Interesting."

"Yes. I wanted to hear more details about it, but they seemed to be in a hurry so they promised that they'd send over the report at a later date."

"Hope I have the time to read it when it arrives."

Raine proceeded along the wall, scouring the wall paintings as if possessed by something.

It was a really impressive mural. In addition to the flat mural, there were three-dimensional ones that had been meticulously carved out. It was also worth noting the eight pieces of jewelry embedded in various parts of the wall, as it probably symbolized something. Perhaps it represented the eight Great Sprits.

As Raine followed along the mural, she felt her feet hit something hard. Raine stopped and shed light near where her foot was and realized that she had stepped on some round object.

Could it have been a part of the ruin? Raine picked it up and observed it closely.

"This is… the mark of the Church of Martel."

Raine quickly slipped back into her calm, concerted self.

In the days when Balacruf Mausoleum was still prosperous, the Church of Martel had not yet existed. In other words, whatever it was had to have been brought in recently. Noticing Raine's voice, Linar came over.

"Is it from the Church of Martel? Someone from the Imperial Research Academy might have dropped it."

"That's true. Is it some kind of amulet, maybe? Like the ones that people hold on to pray for their health and safety?"

"Could be."

Raine brought the amulet close to the light to observe the back side. If it were an amulet that was supposed to provide safety on a journey, surely the name of the owners or some prayer words would have been engraved on it somewhere. These writings are stored in the database of the Church so that they would be able to look them up if needed.

It seemed to be quite an old one, for the letterings on the backside were mostly faded and undecipherable. Maybe it wore off after tracing over the letters so many times. Only about three things were decipherable: "To my beloved son," "Laker," and "magic that can..."

"Say, Linar. Was there someone named Laker among the members of the Imperial Research Academy?"

"I have no idea. I only had a chance to talk to the guards who were escorting the researchers. The mayor could probably tell you more than I could."

"That's true. But whoever's it is, if they've held onto it so long the lettering has started fading away, then it's got to be pretty important. We could probably give it back to the original owner if we contact the Imperial Research Academy or the Church of Martel, but first let's find out if anyone named 'Laker' was part of the excavation team."

"You always were so kind, Raine."

"Oh, that's not true. Anyone who'd see these engraved letterings would probably want to give it back to the original owner. It could have been a gift from their mother for all we know."

"Liar," Raine said to herself.

The Raine she used to be never would have said that. Even if she did have the means to find the owner at the time, she probably wouldn't have thought it was worth the trouble. And the mere idea of the amulet having been a gift from someone's mother would have been enough to give her the chills.

But the Journey of Regeneration had influenced Raine to some extent. She learned the true intentions behind her mother's actions, learned the beauty of trust, and most importantly, at last was able to form a clear picture of the person she knew she really wanted to be all along.

It was her comrade, Lloyd, who showed her the way.

Where was he now?

Hopefully, he was safe. That was the only thing on Raine's mind. And that, at least, was definitely not small potatoes.

CHAPTER 3

THE STRONG AND THE UNTOUCHABLE

強さと醜さと

"Hey, Harley?"

Genis Sage stared at his reflection in the mirror reproachfully, as Harley was engaged in polishing some sort of junk next to him.

"What's up?"

"How long does it take for a Half-elf to become a full-fledged adult?"

"Huh?"

Harley stopped what he was doing and looked back at him involuntarily. Genis could feel Harley's stare on him and felt uncomfortable, and shifted around awkwardly in front of the mirror.

"I mean like, you know how I've always been on the small side, right? I heard we grow at the same speed as humans, but I'm just wondering if maybe I grow at a slower rate or something."

"Uh huh," Harley stated flatly, staring carefully at Genis, as if trying to gauge whether or not he was even sane. "How old are you, again?"

"Me?" As if there was anyone else he was talking to. "Oh, uh… I'm almost fourteen. Or uh, I will be soon!"

Harley laughed wryly. "'Almost fourteen!' So you're still thirteen, then. Get a grip, already!"

"What do you mean, 'get a grip'?"

"I'm talking about your growth rate. Half-elves grow at around the same rate as Humans do. But males and females grow at different rates. Meaning that you'll have a growth spurt a little later. Relax."

"Really!? Think I could like, become super buff, too!?"

"Buff? You looking to become a body builder, or what?"

"Well, not exactly. But I wanna to grow bigger and taller! I wanna build a lot of muscles and be like my favorite martial artists."

For a moment, Regal popped into Genis's mind, but he dismissed that image quickly.

No. He didn't want to be like Regal. Just on par with someone like him, as a man.

"Well nothing's impossible. But don't bet the farm on it, either."

"Huh? Why not!?"

"Hate to say it, but it's a matter of race. Half-elves have blood of Elves mixed in them, so there's a limit to how much muscle you can build with that stature. What Half-elf generation are you, Genis?"

"First generation," sighed Genis.

"For real!? So one of your parents is a pureblood? That's pretty rare, these days. But yeah, that means your road to buffness definitely has a permanent roadblock."

"What!? How come!?"

"It ain't hard to tell, kid. Elves are known for their tall stature, leanness, and beauty. And since you're first generation, that means yours runs pretty strong. Train all you like, but you'll never get all that jacked."

"No way."

Genis sank down helplessly onto the chair. Today just felt like an endless string of disappointment after disappointment.

He couldn't find any information about Lloyd and his whereabouts, his ticket to bufftown had been permanently revoked, and his own sister Raine, who he hadn't seen in forever, totally ditched him to go check out some lame ruins. Sure, maybe he was exaggerating a bit, but it felt like the whole world was rejecting him. No matter how you looked at it, it was a bad day.

"C'mon, cheer up. It could be worse!"

"I'm just so disappointed. Yet another dream crushed!"

"I swear, you sound like such a little kid right now."

"I'm not a kid!"

"My bad—I meant adolescent."

Harley grinned and chuckled sarcastically, rubbing his chin.

"Well if you really do fancy yourself an adult, then I guess you're able-bodied enough to help me with my work. You got some time on your hands anyways, right?"

"What kind of work?"

Genis looked at Harley's hands. Harley had been polishing a crystal-like, translucent stone for a while.

"What's that?"

"It's a part of the Quaker."

"Is this another wacky invention of yours?"

"The hell you mean 'wacky invention?' My Quaker is gonna change the world!"

Harley put down the stone and picked up a wooden box on the table which measured around 20 inches on all sides.

"Look at how simple it is! When an earthquake is detected, this device will record the tremor and identify the direction and the distance to the epicenter. My invention will shape the future, count on it!

"So it's still a work in progress."

"Well, yeah. I mean, you can't really experiment on stuff like this, can you?"

"And you really think this thing is gonna work?"

"Of course! I'll eat my hat if it doesn't. I plan on making a device that predicts earthquakes. Based on current observations, the device I'm going to make should be able to predict future earthquakes."

Genis appeared to be actually impressed this time. So that was his goal, then.

It was no secret that earthquakes had been happening quite frequently in the Asgard region. Even just two days ago, when Genis arrived in the city, there was a small earthquake. Quakes were so rare in this region that when they did happen, the local residents would fly into a panic—as they should, considering that Asgard itself is surrounded by cliffs. Genis assumed that Harley was working hard to help the situation and calm the distressed residents.

All this effort, even though he was a Half-elf.

Then again, it may have been precisely because he was a Half-elf that he worked so hard.

But Genis dismissed these thoughts promptly. Something so trivial should never serve as the basis for just helping people in need. Harley was simply trying to do something to help his fellow residents living in the city.

"If it really were possible to predict earthquakes, that really would change the world!"

"With the Quaker, anything is possible!"

Harley laughed out confidently. Genis gave a faint smile.

"All right. What is it you need help with?"

"Well, it's like this. The Quaker is kind of plain in its design, you see. I want to spice it up a bit."

As Genis tilted his head slightly in confusion, Harley tossed him a piece of wood lying nearby. Genis caught it and took a closer look at it.

"Think you could make something with that? Like, something I could put next to the Quaker to make it look more interesting."

"I'm not really that good at decorating! And why give so much attention to something so trivial?! Should you be concerned about like, designs and schematics and stuff like that?"

"Hey now—creativity is a big part of the invention process as well!"

"Well it's not like I'm the one who's supposed to be inventing things, here!"

"Whatever! Quit complaining and get to work. There's a chisel in the back of the toolbox."

"Fine, fine!" Genis pouted. He stood up and reluctantly took the chisel in his hand.

"You know, I haven't done anything like this since art class, and it's not like changing the design is going to make a better invention anyways."

"Yeah? And?"

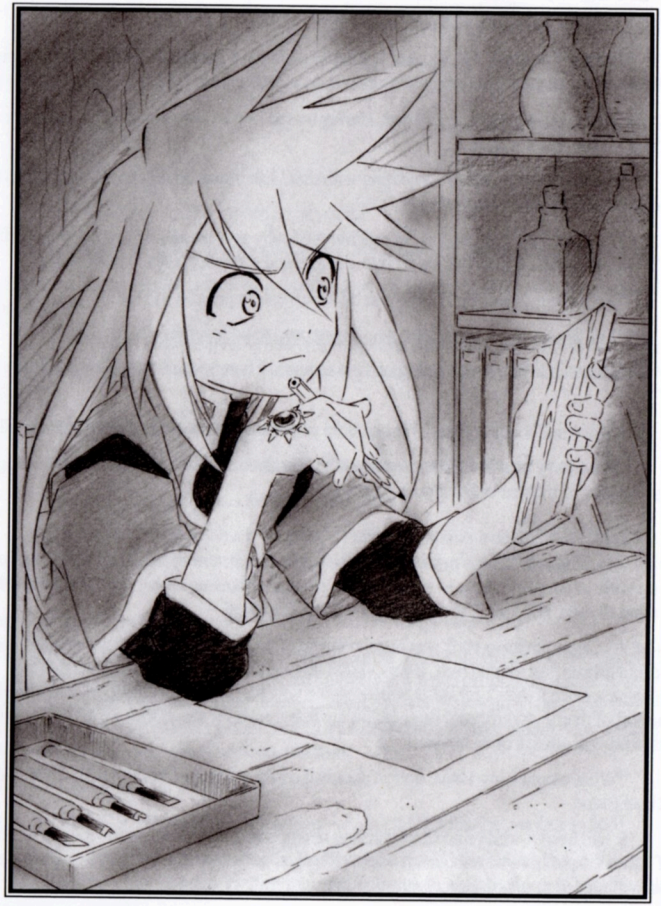
"Oh, forget it." Genis puckered his lips and took a pencil in his hand. It'd be kinda hard to come up with some idea of how to spruce up the design without an actual plan laid out. Nothing came to mind though, and Genis found himself getting frustrated.

Smart as he was, artsy, creative stuff was just never Genis' field. Math and physics he could handle with ease, but artistry just eluded him. It wasn't that he was clumsy—he just found it hard to maintain interest since it didn't press his buttons in the way that other subjects seemed to do. If he had some sort of theme or direction, he could swing it, but making something from nothing off the top of his head was always quite challenging.

"What would Lloyd have done?" Genis thought to himself, recalling his artistic, detail-oriented best friend.

It had been a while since Lloyd Irving disappeared, but Genis hadn't heard even so much of a rumor as to his whereabouts. It was as if he had quite literally disappeared off the face of the planet, without so much of a trace.

"Damn it, Lloyd." Genis muttered to himself. "We promised we'd always be together, remember? Where did you go off to? Aren't we friends?"



Genis could have ranted on and on about it. But deep down, he knew that his anger was really born out of worry for his dear friend. Maybe Lloyd did have his reasons, but how could he just up and disappear like that? It was almost like that other time when their friend, Collette, disappeared entirely during the onset of the Journey of Regeneration.

Back then Colette left the town by herself, leaving behind a letter saying only that she didn't want to burden Lloyd with her mission. Lloyd was furious and chased after her in a huff. That he would then go around and do the same thing to his own friends was both hypocritical and completely ridiculous. Genis vowed that if he ever did find out where Lloyd was, he'd give him all kinds of hell for what he did.

For a second, Genis thought about writing "Stupid Lloyd" somewhere on the design, but stopped. Harley probably would have just yelled at him and made him change it anyways.

In the end, Genis decided to use a windmill as the motif. It was tough at first, but once he got started, he found himself oddly enjoying it. Before long he was engrossed in his design work completely, and all distractions melted away like snow in the warm sunlight.

When he snapped out of the fervor he had worked himself into, he realized he had carved out all of the wood blocks, and had nothing left to work with. Genis called out to Harley, who was hard at work on the Quaker's interior.

"Hey, Harl—"

"Whoa!"

Harley panicked and practically fell out of his chair before Genis could even finish saying his name, startled by the sudden outburst. Shortly after, there was a loud cracking sound followed by an acrid burning smell. Harley threw his tools to the side in frustration.

"I'm uh, guessing that was a bad time?" Genis asked timidly.

"Sure was!" replied Harley, angrily.

"I'm sorry! I didn't realize what you were doing required such intense concentration!"

Harley flung himself against a work chair and flopped down, arms hanging tiredly.

"Forget it. It isn't your fault. You know what? Why don't we just try and take a break for a little bit, huh?"

Harley stood up and headed over to the kitchen.

"Want coffee?"

"Sure."

Genis put his chisel down and stretched for a long while. He realized that he felt stiff all over, like how he often felt after sitting down for a long study session. He stretched his back, rotated his arms, and flexed his shoulders.

Before long he caught a whiff of fresh, ground coffee. Genis and Raine were both coffee drinkers, but Genis, kid that he was, put heaps of cream and sugar in his, for which Raine always chided him.

"Here you go. Help yourself with the sugar and milk."

Harley put the coffee mug on the table in front of Genis and sat down on the chair next to him. Harley drank his black. He started practically chugging the stuff almost immediately after he sat down.

"Yeah, that's the stuff. I feel like I'm back from the dead!"

Harley's expression alone made it seem like that was the case. It was a welcome change after his recent outburst.

"Boy, Harley, it looks like that coffee really got you wired!"

"Same with you, I see."

"What do you mean? I haven't even had a sip yet."

Genis remarked with a suspicious glance as he put a bunch of milk and sugar in his coffee. Harley glanced over and mumbled, "That looks pretty sweet."

"Well, excuse me! A little sugar actually helps get the brain moving, I'll have you know."

Genis blew on his coffee repeatedly to cool it down. For some reason, Harley gazed contently at him.

"What is it? Is something the matter?"

"Just curious about how you like that coffee. It's hot, isn't it?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I guess it's pretty hot."

"Well, interesting you'd so," said Harley with a sly grin. "It's actually iced coffee."

"Wait, seriously? It is?"

"Mmmhmm." Harley nodded. "I made it cold this time."

Genis took another sip, this time analyzing carefully, letting the taste and temperature linger in his mouth for a few seconds.

"Oh yeah. I guess it is pretty cold."

Harley erupted into wild laughter. "I lied! It's actually hot!"

Genis frowned and slammed his cup of coffee—which actually was, in fact, quite hot—on the table. "Can't I just enjoy my coffee in peace?! Stop making fun of me!"

"Oh come on! I'm just trying to get a rise out of you, kid. You know how you were a bit depressed, what with your crazy sister leaving you behind and not being able to find Lloyd and whatnot?"

Genis frowned and thought for a bit. He knew Harley was right. He was still worried about Lloyd and all, but he felt able to relax a bit. He was admittedly a bit peeved about how Raine just ditched him like that, but then again he knew it was nothing personal—just his fanatic sister getting locked into "Ruins Mode," as usual.

"You know, I can't explain why, but when I was working on the design, I just felt like minor details didn't matter anymore. I felt more composed, in the moment."

"Hah! Told ya so! Simple tasks lead to confrontation with your mind. Soon enough, you'll enter a state of peacefulness and feel more calm and relaxed. And a little playful joke never hurt to that end, either."

So that was how Harley was. Genis glanced at him and grinned.

"You know Harley, you actually aren't all that bad of a guy, sometimes!"

"The hell's that supposed to mean?!" Harley made a contrived sour face, finished his coffee, and stood up. "I'm gonna go get a refill."

Genis started to giggle—it was just too funny.

For Genis, Harley was someone special. He was the first Half-elf Genis has met that wasn't a Desian or his family member. What's more, Harley has openly disclosed his identity as a Half-elf and lives among Humans, unlike the majority of Half-elves who live in exile, always hiding their true identity. That would have been something unfathomable for Genis before the Journey of Regeneration.

But in any case, Harley was definitely something else. Only another Half-elf could truly understand what it's like to be a Half-elf in day to day life. In that sense, Genis felt Harley embodied the ideal Half-elf, something to strive for.

"But you're right, I was feeling kinda down today. But I'm feeling better now,"

Genis said as he sipped his hot coffee—which was actually iced—which had then turned out to be actually hot.

It had just the right amount of sweetness. He felt refreshed.

"Well anyways, that's good to know."

He heard Harley's voice from the kitchen. It was slightly muffled by the sound of him pouring another cup of coffee, which may or may not have been hot.

It was such a peaceful time. He wished everyone in this world could lead a tranquil life like this, but reality was not so kind.

"That reminds me, what was it you wanted to get my attention for back there?"

Harley came back to the workroom with a second cup of coffee in hand. Genis took a look at the wooden blocks stacked on the table and remembered that he had run out of wooden blocks to carve.

"Oh, yeah. I'm pretty much done with the design."

"Oh," Harley took a look at Genis's design and narrowed his eyes in, appraising it. "Not half bad. A windmill, huh?"

"Yup! 'Cuz that's what Asgard's known for. Well, either that or the ruins!"

"Think you could get me another two or three copies of this?"

"I could if I had more wooden blocks to work with!" said Genis.

"I think Linar had some extra ones lying around his house. If we ask Aisha, I'm sure she'll let us have some."

Genis took another long sip of his coffee—which was indeed pretty hot, and not iced as he had previously been led to believe—and stood up.

"I'll go take care of it!"

"All right. I'm counting on you. Oh, and Genis?"

Genis paused in the doorway just as he was about to leave. "What is it?"

"I lied again! It was actually hot chocolate!"

Genis stood in the doorway for a moment, entirely nonplussed, his jaw slack, and then rushed back to the table where his cup was. He took another long sip. Damn it. He was right. It really was hot chocolate. How had he not noticed before?

Harley exploded with wild laughter again, holding his sides, chuckling so hard tears now streamed through tightly closed eyes. Saying nothing, Genis slammed his mug down, motioned for the hallway, and then slammed the front door in frustration on his way out. Harley's mad laughter reverberated through the house still and could be heard for long after Genis began walking to Aisha's house.

Even outside, there was no wind. The smoke seemed to be rising straight up from the chimneys. Given the current situation, even just a strong gust of wind would probably help quell the people's fears to some degree. Then again, a veritable gale would cause trouble on a whole different level. As with most things, moderation was the key.

Surrounded by cliffs, the City of Asgard was well known for its breathtaking views. On sunny, cloudless days, you could even see the ocean, shining in the distance. Genis gazed at the neighboring scenery as he went up the stairs. Every step upwards he took, his field of vision increased and he was able to gradually watch the landscape change. Knowing that all his hard work was going towards protecting the beautiful environment that now surrounded him gave him some solace and peace of mind, at least.

Genis couldn't help but think that he'd be enjoying himself more if his fellow comrades from the Journey of Regeneration were here, but he knew better than to complain. Each and every one of them was working hard, doing what they needed to do.

Genis was jumping up the stairs when gossiping and giddy housewives took notice of him. They

whispered something to each other, and soon enough, the taller of the two women beckoned him to come over.

"What is it?"

As Genis approached them, the shorter woman started to talk to him anxiously.

"Hang on just a sec. Weren't you one of the attendants of the Chosen?"

"Yes, I was," Genis said, somewhat bashfully.

"So, like, we're safe, right?"

"Really? This again?" Genis thought to himself. He got the same kind of treatment from strangers on the way to Asgard, too. People who were worried about the fusion with Tethe'alla and the extreme weather conditions saw him on his travels and recognized him as one of those who traveled with Colette, also known as the "Chosen." Time and time again he would be stopped and asked about whether or not the world had been successfully regenerated. He knew that times were tough and anxieties were high and all, but still, why did people always come to him?

In the first place, it wasn't as if everyone involved was just sitting around doing nothing now, when the world was so unstable on the brink of another crisis. On the journey to retrieve the Exspheres, Lloyd was quick to notice that something was wrong, and took quick action. Thanks to his quick thinking, investigations began in various areas with the cooperation of the King of Tethe'alla. The village of Mizuho and Church of Martel also offered their assistance to resolve the situation.

Come to think of it, Lloyd had mentioned he wanted to ask the Spirit Martel something. Perhaps he had also gone off towards the World Tree.

"Well, if it's about the odd weather we've been having recently, everything is going to be just fine. We're all working hard to—"

"No, that's not it."

One of the housewives interrupted his speech. Genis blinked a couple of times in surprise. The two women exchanged glances and started chattering.

"So you know that Half-elf, Harley?"

"Half-elves are the sworn enemies of the Chosen, aren't they? Why on earth would anyone associate themselves with their kind?"

"Right?! It'd be troublesome for the Chosen, too!"

"Hey kid, what do you think?" She turned to face Genis.

"I mean, you're probably too young to really understand anyways, but—"

Oh, that tore it. Genis had enough. He drew in a deep breath, puffed out his tiny chest as best he could, and shouted: "Enough already! Shut up!"

The two housewives staggered and looked at him, flabbergasted.

"You should both be ashamed of yourselves! What do you know about Harley, anyway?!" he spat.

"Didn't you hear me the first time? He's a Half-elf. What else matters?"

Seriously? Could that have really been her reasoning? Just because he's a Half-elf? So what? What's so bad about being a Half-elf, anyways? Genis' brow furrowed and his face grew red just pondering this woman's logic. To think that Harley was toiling endlessly to save the very people who were lambasting him was infuriating.

"Harley's only has this city's best interests at heart, and—"

"Well if that's really true, then he should do us all a favor and leave."

"Why? Because he's a half-elf? Does even having to look at one bother you that much?"

"What are you getting all hot and bothered about?"

Genis threw a fierce look at the baffled housewives.

"If you guys hate Half-elves so much, then you'd better quit wasting your time talking to me! Because guess what? I'm a Half-elf, too!"

"What? You must be joking!" The shorter one burst out in laughter. "There's no way that a Half-elf could accompany The Chosen!"

"Right?! What a riot!"

The two laughed looking at each other, but noticed Genis scowling at them and started to stiffen their expressions.

"Wait, you mean—you were being serious?"

"No way!"

The two made a face like they'd just seen a monster and looked down upon Genis. Their expressions were twisted and full of hatred.

Noticing the commotion, residents of the city began to gather around them. Genis spotted Harley among them and felt like bursting into tears, his fists were clenched, his teeth grit so hard you could almost hear them grinding.

"Then we actually have you to blame for all this then, don't we?" One of the housewives glared at him. "It's your fault the World Regeneration failed!"

"Failed?!" Genis stammered with rage. "What do you mean, 'failed?!'"

"Do you have your head in the sand? The weather conditions had been strange lately and people from Thethe'alla are walking around as if they own the place! The Chosen said we were 'saved,' but I see no salvation anywhere! No matter how you think about it, this so-called 'Journey of Regeneration' was just one big failure. And I'm willing to bet that it was because a half-elf like

you was on it!"

"That's it! This worthless Half-elf must have tainted the journey with his foul blood!"

Genis was blind with rage and trembled with anger. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he knew that appealing to the sentiments of people like this was a pointless endeavor.

"Hey! The hell you two think you're doing!?"

Genis saw Harley coming over, wading through the crowd. His eyes were flashing with anger. Genis stifled his sob and looked back—and was dumbstruck by what he saw.

Behind Harley, who was already red with anger, Genis saw his sister, Raine, rushing over to the scene, face as angry as a demon. A different fear took over Genis's body as his tears stopped. Harley cocked his head inquiringly as he approached the scene. He probably hadn't noticed that a furious Raine was charging up like a locomotive behind him.

The moment Harley tried to raise his voice, Raine kicked him out of the way and deftly jumped to the center of the field.

"Hey, you two! Why don't you pick on someone your own size?!"

"Raine?! What are you doing here?" said Genis, taken aback by his sister's grand entrance. On second thought though, he quickly realized that such overly dramatic actions really were quite par for his sister after all.

"Take back what you've said and apologize to my younger brother right now!"

Overwhelmed by Raine's zeal, the two housewives stepped back.

"Apologize? Why, whatever for?"

Raine's jaw went slack with disbelief. Raine herself was no stranger to prejudice either, but could these women really have been that dense? "What do you think?! For slandering my younger brother and his friend!"

"Last time I checked, you can't call it 'slander' if you're just stating the truth."

"Oh 'the truth,' huh? What truth? Is that what people call prejudice nowadays? If you're so sure that the sacred journey was tainted by such foul Half-elves like us, then enlighten me! Show me your facts! Tell me how you came to this conclusion, since clearly you're so damn smart!"

"Well, I, erm—"

"In the first place, you don't have any idea what the World Regeneration is even about. The Chosen are responsible for World Regeneration itself, but who do you think is responsible for maintaining the world now that it's been regenerated? That's right: people like you and me. But if that responsibility really was that of the Chosen, like you seem to think it is, then do you really think a Half-elf or two would make any sort of difference if they had that kind of power?"

"Calm yourselves, everyone! What's all this kerfuffle about?"

The Mayor came running up to the scene in a huff. Apparently someone told him about the commotion, and he came to arbitrate the dispute. The two housewives shuffled restlessly in place as the Mayor approached them.

"These Half-elves were bossing us around!"

"These distinguished individuals are the saviors of our city! How dare you treat them in such a fashion!"

Having been called out by the Mayor in such a fashion right in front of a huge crowd, the two housewives scuttled away hastily, unable to endure the sea of prying, judging eyes they found themselves in. The Mayor then swung around his cane to disperse the crowd.

"All right, everyone. Go back to what you were doing! This isn't a show!"

People started to disperse by twos and threes. Some of them stopped by Genis and his friends to apologize for the two women's rude behavior. There weren't many that did, of course, but it still made all the difference to Genis.

In the end, only 5 people remained on site after the commotion died down: the two Sage siblings, the Mayor, Harley, and Linar. After a little while, the Mayor faced toward Genis and Raine and bowed apologetically.

"I'm sorry for what the residents of my town said to you."

"No, it's fine." Genis shook his head from side to side, "I'm sorry for causing such a scene. Well, even though it was really my sister who—"

As soon as he said that, Genis felt an icy, cold stare from Raine. In all his travels yet, it was by far the most frightening thing he'd ever experienced.

"Most people are still in shock from the World Regeneration. What a shame that true human nature comes out only in such times of hardship."

The Mayor let out a sigh, resting both hands on his cane. Raine nodded in agreement and looked back at Genis.

"Come to think of it, you didn't talk back to them like you usually do, did you?"

"Huh?"

"You know how I scold you for badmouthing all the time? Usually when stuff like this happens, you go off ranting and raving, saying that Humans are foul creatures and all sorts of other insults."

"Well, maybe I've changed. I quit saying things like that. I understand better now that we've gone through the Journey of Regeneration. If I talk about Humans the way that some of them talk about Half-elves, then I'm no better. It doesn't change anything. And of course, if I do the same thing, then I hardly have the right to complain about it. I'm tired of fighting. I want to make friends. I have to change first. It has to start with me."

Harley's eyes widened, clearly impressed.

"I'm so proud of you, Genis."

"It's not a big deal. And besides, you're the same as me. You're living with Humans because you want to learn to live in peace with them, aren't you?"

Harley couldn't help but smile. Genis was absolutely right.

"Yeah. I guess I am, huh?"

"But just a minute! Raine, you're back so early. What got you back so quickly? You usually take days when you're out investigating ruins."

Genis looked up at Raine. Raine turned back toward the Mayor, as if she'd just remembered something suddenly.

"That's right! There was something I wanted to ask you. I heard that a research team from Tethe'alla's Imperial Research Academy came by here not too long ago. Do you know anything about it?"

The Mayor made a sullen face and nodded.

"It's not something I could forget, even if I'd wanted to. We learned our lesson the hard way—about how despotic and tyrannical people from Tethe'alla are."

"Did something happen?"

When Genis asked, the Mayor looked up at the sky, exhaling deeply.

"The researchers were polite, but the guards who were escorting them were so arrogant and brash. They disturbed our peaceful city."

"Was there a researcher named Laker among them?"

"Laker, you say? Most of the researchers didn't even drop by the city, since their base camp was up near the Balacruf Mausoleum. The only person who stopped by was a woman who came to negotiate the right to conduct investigation in this area. I think her name was Malory. Does that ring any bells?"

"We found this amulet in one of the ruins we went in earlier." Raine took out the pendant that had the mark of the Church of Martel from her pocket. "We thought one of the researchers probably dropped it by accident."

The Mayor looked at the amulet and frowned, sighing a bit. "I'm afraid I can't be much help here."

"I see. Do you think it'd be better if I contact the Church of Martel in Tethe'alla or the Imperial Research Academy?"

"Why not have Zelos take a look at it?" said Genis enthusiastically.

This "Zelos" Genis mentioned was the Chosen of Tethe'alla, and one of his old friends. His

personality was the polar opposite of that of Colette, the Chosen of Sylvarant. He had magnificent powers in the world of Tethe'alla and had great influence over the church and the royal family.

"Hmm, good idea. In that case we should hand it over to Presea so she can give it to him properly. I heard she was going to drop by the city of Luin."

As soon as Genis heard that, he felt his blood rushing to his face, and began to stammer uncontrollably. "P-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p, pre-pre-pre…"

Could it be? Presea? The very same Presea Combatir that he knew was going to visit Luin? Luin was pretty close to Asgard as it was, and Raine and Genis were right there already. Besides, Genis and Presea were friends, so if he went to see her, it's not like that means anything, right? Of course not. There was nothing wrong or implied with that! No ulterior motive here whatsoever! Or so Genis thought to himself.

"I—I—I'll deliver that!" Genis stammered, awkwardly raising a hand.

"Oh, I can't ask you to do that! I was just thinking out loud, is all."

"Why not? Are you saying I've got some sort of ulterior motive?! Well I—I don't! Really, I don't! Nothing to hide, no sir, no way, not me!"

Raine gave an exasperated sigh, then shook her head.

"Fine, have it your own way. I'm counting on you, Genis. Make sure you explain the situation properly and give it to Presea."

Raine took Genis' hands and placed the amulet in them, gently wrapping her hands around his. Then she began to tightly squeeze her hands, such to an extent that it almost felt painful.

"Lose this and I'll never forgive you."

And so, as soon as it came, Genis' buzz was killed.

CHAPTER 4

LOOMING SHADOWS

忍び寄る影

It had been a couple of months since Presea Combatir last visited Luin.

It was in this same city that Lloyd and his comrades once provided support during the Journey of Regeneration. In order to rebuild the near-ruined economy, which was demolished by the Desians, they've lent a hand in more ways than one. It may have been for that same reason that the residents were all very grateful for their efforts, and continued to sing their praises to this day.

It had been a while since they'd been back, but the town of Luin was as gorgeous as it ever was. A statue of Lloyd had been built right in the middle of the city's grand fountain, which now served as a symbol for the city itself. Even though quite some time has passed since the World Regeneration, the bronze statue was still sparkling clean. It was clearly important as a beacon of hope for the people.

"Nothing's changed. It looks like it's frozen in time," Presea said to herself.

True enough, in the world's current state of crisis, there weren't many places where people still acted grateful towards those who saved the world.

Presea accompanied Colette Brunel, the Chosen of Sylvarant, in the Journey of Regeneration and assisted her with her mission. Thanks to their efforts, the two separated worlds were joined as one, and people from two different dimensions had to face each other for the first time. Naturally, things were quite chaotic at first.

For starters, the world map had radically changed in terms of geography. This in turn meant that logistics and trade routes changed, and with people of different cultures now interacting with each other for the first time, there were disputes. The major changes that cropped up in the natural environment only worsened the situation. There was snow in the deserts, scorching hot sun in the

northern provinces, and a significant water shortage all around the globe. The world's agricultural system suffered serious damage, and because of the rough, stormy seas, even the fishing industry had all but grinded to a halt.

There were many who put all the blame on Colette for all the misfortune that had transpired in the wake of the regeneration. Some even went as far to say that the entire World Regeneration was a failure, and that everything in its wake was all the Chosen's fault. When people found out that Presea was among the Chosen on the journey, there were those that shunned her entirely as well.

In such tumultuous times, the town of Luin, peaceful as ever despite the circumstances, was like a sanctuary for Presea. It felt like the only place she could go to and feel accepted.

"Presea!"

Presea saw the Mayor walking towards her from the direction of the plaza, and he brought a familiar face with him.

"It's good to be here."

"Always a pleasure. Welcome back to Luin."

The Mayor smiled nostalgically. Then he pointed to the young man standing next to him and asked, "Do you remember him?"

"I do. We met at the Governor-General's office in Palmacosta. You're Neil, right?"

"Indeed. It's been a while."

Neil bowed courteously.

Neil was the assistant Governor-General of Palmacosta. They became acquainted during the Journey of Regeneration, and he has been assisting Presea with her recent efforts.

Currently, Presea works at an affiliate of a global corporation called Lezareno Company. She was a member of an association managed by the Alicia Fund, which founded the Lezareno Company and backed up the relief efforts in Sylvarant, which as it stood has suffered more devastating damage than Tethe'alla. Presea worked to deliver supplies to locales that were in need.

The city of Palmacosta was hit especially hard after the World Regeneration. The whole city was destroyed and countless innocent lives were lost. The Sylvarant Reconstruction Association focused their efforts on providing extra support for Palmacosta. Neil helped with local rescue efforts, and had been very selfless even during hard times when he suffered personal injury from the damage in Palmacosta. Presea was truly indebted to him for his efforts.

"What are you doing here in Luin, Neil?"

"Since the reconstruction settled down a bit, I renounced my title as Governor-General the other day. I'm taking my time off now and traveling around to see the regenerated world firsthand."

"I see."

"Word came that you arrived in the city when I was talking to Neil, so we came to greet you."

"Thanks. Say, there is a caravan parked near the entrance of the city. I would like to bring in the supplies. Could I bring it around to the plaza?"

"Sure. In fact, let me help you with that."

Neil rolled up his sleeves. The Mayor nodded as well.

"I'll bring everyone over."

"Thanks again."

Presea nodded slightly and ran back towards the city entrance.

For Presea, hauling stuff around was a piece of cake. She could even carry big packages about the size of an adult male with ease, due to an Exphere she had equipped which greatly boosted her power. There were times when she despised it, but she was now grateful to have it.

With the help of Neil and the residents of Luin, the Sylvarant Reconstruction Association was able to carry in the supplies steadily. Soon they'd be done.

But just when Presea wiped the sweat from her brow and motioned to take a quick breather, she heard a strange voice from a distance calling, making an odd sound. "P-p-p-p—", it went. Looking back in suspicion, she saw a silver-haired boy running over from the grassland. It was one of her comrades from the Journey of Regeneration, Genis Sage.

"Pre-pre-pre… Presea!"

Genis waved his arms vigorously as he ran over. For a moment, he disappeared into the tallgrass but his head popped out shortly after and he started running towards her again.

"Genis!"

"Hey! It's been forever!"

Genis panted heavily as he approached Presea. Noticing his scraped knees, Presea took out her handkerchief, dampened it with water, and wiped off the blood from Genis' wound.

"Ouch!"

"Just hold still for a minute."

"I'm fine, really! I don't want to ruin your handkerchief anyways."

"You need to keep the wound clean."

"I'm sorry about this, Presea."

"It's fine. Relax."

Presea took out a first aid kit from the caravan and put a bandage on the wound.

"Here you go."

Genis wiggled around his body loosely as he saw Presea smile.

"Thanks!"

"You're welcome. I am an older sister, you know."

Presea beamed with satisfaction. It was always like this when she was with Genis. It made her feel happy that she was able to do something that she wasn't able to do for her younger sister Alicia.

"What are you doing here anyways, Genis?"

Once again, Presea was surprised by the reunion with old friends and acquaintances. Starting with Neil and all, perhaps today was the day to reaffirm their friendship and bonds.

"I—I—" Genis stammered. "I heard from Raine that you were here so I uh, I came."

"Is Raine here too?"

"Nope, just me."

"Did you come here alone, Genis? Wasn't it dangerous?"

"I'm totally fine! I can take care of myself. Besides, I'm a grown man, I'm thirteen years old! What about you, weren't you also—"

"I came here with the people of the association," Presea said flatly. "Besides, I'm already twenty-nine."

"Oh. That's right."

Genis frowned, his expression rather sad. Presea looked at him anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Genis. Did I say anything that hurt your feelings?"

"O—Of course not! I'm totally fine, promise!"

Genis blushed bright red as he shook his head in protest.

"Oh hey, about the reason I came here," said Genis. "Raine wanted me to deliver this to you."

Genis took out a pendant wrapped in a lace handkerchief from his bag. Presea handled it carefully and took a good look at it.

"This is an amulet belonging to the Church of Martel."

"Yeah. My sister found it when she was doing research in the ruins. She said someone from the Imperial Research Academy of Tethe'alla might have dropped it. It seemed important, so we thought about contacting either the Church of Martel or the Imperial Research Academy, and then we thought maybe Zelos could take a look at it for us."

"So you want me to deliver it to Zelos? All right. I'll take it."

Presea rewrapped the amulet and put it carefully away.

"Any word about Lloyd?"

Presea finally got the gumption to ask Genis the question that had been on her mind the moment she saw him. But in response, Genis' shoulders sank, and his expression became dark. He had nothing to report.

It was Lloyd who helped Presea to reflect on her life, and she yearned to return the favor someday. But now Lloyd was missing. She was worried that he may have needed her help more than ever and that she had no way to provide it.

"Nothing yet, huh?"

"Yeah. I wonder what Lloyd's up to?"

"So do I."

Both of them had nothing more to say. The silence that followed was deafening.

After some time, Genis let his breath out as to break the heavy silence. Maybe it was time to change the subject.

"By the way Presea, you're here in Luin for work, right?"

"Yes. We're right in the middle of bringing in the supplies."

"Then I'll help out, too!"

Genis reached out for the nearest thing he could find to help carry: a large, wooden box.

"Actually, Genis, that box is really heavy. Why don't you just let me carry it?"

"Pfft, this thing? It's a piece of cake for a guy like me!"

Genis grunted and lifted up the box with his tiny frame. His face became bright red almost instantly as he strained to keep it aloft.

"Genis, really, I can carry it for you."

"I told you, I got this!"

Genis began walking unsteadily towards the city with the wooden box in his hands, wavering from left to right as he staggered forth as best he could. Presea was oddly moved by his tenacity. After all, if someone his size was working this hard, how could she allow herself to slack off? Presea stacked up three boxes of the same size and carried them, following after Genis. After a couple of rounds, they finally finished carrying in the supplies. After carrying in the last box, Genis gave out an exhausted sigh and sprawled out on the ground.

"I can't do this anymore! I feel like I'm gonna die!"

Presea could tell he really did overexert himself. She handed Genis a bottle of water.

"Thanks, Presea."

"Doesn't the water taste delicious after hard work?"

"Oh yeah, it totally does. Nothing like some ice cold water after a long day's work!" Genis beamed.

"Cold?" said Presea. "It's actually hot water. Sorry, it was all I could find."

Genis began chuckling to himself. Before long, this chuckling became wild laughter, which both disturbed and frightened Presea. She took a step back as Genis guffawed loudly, eyes as wide as they could be. Then, Genis composed himself and pointed a finger right at her.

"Oh, I'll bet it's actually hot! I guess you think that because I'm so much younger than you, I must've been born yesterday, huh? Well, guess again! You'll have to get up pretty early in the morning to pull a fast one on me!"

Genis put the bottle to his lips and gulped down the water inside. It was practically like liquid magma, by far the hottest thing he'd ever drank in his life. His tongue burned like fire and he spat out the steaming water on the ground, as he dropped to his knees, rolling in agony by Presea's feet.

"Genis, what's gotten into you?!" said Presea, pressing her hands to the side of Genis' head to hold him still so she could examine the severity of his injuries. "I wasn't lying! It actually is hot! You have to slow down when you drink it!"

Genis could feel reality crumbling from beneath him, as he grasped at his throat in pain. What was this world coming to? How did he get here? The Chosen—who'd saved the world—were now hated by most of the population for it. Abnormal weather continued with no end in sight, Half-elves were still persecuted, his hot coffee was actually cold and then turned out to actually be hot, and then was actually hot chocolate, and now he'd just burnt himself chugging a bottle of hot water which he previously thought was actually iced. Everything was covered in lies, lies, lies. How could anyone tell what was real and what wasn't anymore? He just wanted to give up entirely.

Presea took the water bottle from his hand and scrambled to think of where she could get some cold water for Genis. It might not have been the cleanest option, but she thought to head for the fountain plaza. Surely she could get some there. But when she turned around, she saw the mayor running towards the fountain. It looked like there was some kind of commotion going on. Presea ran after him.

"You all know how arrogant Tethe'allans are!"

Presea came to a stop. An angry young man stood in front of the fountain, hands on his hips with a steel-cold glare on his face as he shouted at the crowd.

There was a crowd of people in front of the fountain plaza where the statue of Lloyd stood. Apparently, a group of young men were giving out fliers and trying to garner support for some kind of agenda they were pushing.

"They treat us like slaves! Are you blind?! How can we allow such atrocities to

continue? Enough! We won't take it anymore!"

"Stop it, all of you!"

The Mayor came to stop the commotion. One of the young men turned back to the Mayor, chest puffed out, scowling angrily. "What right have you to stop our protest?"

"I'm the Mayor of this town, I'll have you know! It is my duty to keep peace and order here!"

"Oh is it, now? Then that means that you have the responsibility to protect us Sylvarantis, does it not? Are you not ashamed of borrowing the power of the Tethe'allans?"

"I would have us handle everything ourselves if it were possible. But you need to understand that with the abnormal weather problem, it isn't as simple as all that. And moreover, the Tethe'allans have been of great help to us, especially when it comes to medical aid."

"Don't you see?! That's exactly why they treat us like dogs: because we live by eating right from their hands!"

"So these are the Vanguards," said Neil, having arrived at the plaza after Presea. He gave a stern look at the group of young men. Presea looked back and saw him bite his lips while staring, as if sizing each member up.

"They're a rising radical organization of Sylvarantis. If they keep on going like this they're sure to raise a ruckus."

Presea nodded in agreement and started to push through the crowd to where the Mayor stood.

"Please wait! We're not here to harm you."

Presea ran towards the middle of the crowd and stood in front of the Mayor, steadfast and unmoving. Her gaze was like stone and she opened her arms in protest.

"We Tethe'allans just want to help our fellow Sylvarantis."

"And just who are you?" asked the Vanguard. His face was twisted in a snarl.

"I am from the Sylvarant Reconstruction Association."

"Ah hah! Do you see? They'd go as far as to send a small child like this to do their dirty work! They don't really care about providing relief to the people! They just want to teach their children to follow in their wicked ways!"

Presea was at a loss for words. If there was ever a time in which she'd been frustrated with her perpetually childlike appearance, this was it. The Exphere she had equipped, which was parasitic in nature, had halted her growth. She could do naught but look like a child for the rest of her days. But she knew that even trying to explain this to the men in front of her would be a waste of time.

"We are the Sylvarant Liberation Front Vanguard! We are looking for brave souls who are willing to join us and fight against injustice! Now is the time to rise! My fellow Sylvaranti, where

is your pride?!"

"Who among you will band together with us and stand against evil?"

"No one with a brain, that's for sure!"

It was Genis, who had recovered from the hot water incident and was currently pushing his way to the front of the crowd.

"Oh brother, not another kid," scoffed the Vanguard.

"Yeah, well even a kid can tell how stupid you're all acting! You're just lumping all Tethe'allans together as if they're all the same! Why, you're no better than those who discriminate against Half-elves! Tethe'allans and Sylvarantis alike both have good and bad people among them. That's how it is. You can't judge a person's character simply based on their race!"

The Vanguards exchanged perplexed glances with each other. They probably weren't sure how hard they should go off on a kid like Genis. Presea mustered up all the courage she could. If even Genis was taking a stand, she wasn't going to back down.

"We aren't trying to look down on you, nor are we looking for praise. We just want to help. That's one of the reasons why I joined the Sylvarant Reconstruction Agency, and that's why I am here now. Please, trust us."

There was a silence at first, but then some of the townsfolk that were present stepped forth and started to speak up.

"Hey, Vanjerks or whatever you guys are called! How dare you speak ill of Presea! She was one of the comrades of Lloyd and Sheena, the heroes who saved our city! No one talks like that about her!"

And with that one remark, a whole can of worms opened up. One by one, the townsfolk started stepping forward to speak their minds.

"That's right! Sheena actually is a Tethe'allan, and she put her life on the line to save us!"

"I won't deny I've met a few lousy Tethe'allans in my time. But anyone who talks like that about our town heroes has got another thing coming!"

The calls of the residents started to overpower that of the Vanguards. Noticing that the odds were against them, the Vanguards hurriedly left the plaza, as their leader ran away with his hands in the air, timidly crying out something about how anyone who wanted to join was welcome to come to Palmacosta with them. After watching them leave the city, Presea turned towards the crowd.

"I'm sorry for all the fuss."

"No need to be sorry, miss!" said one of the townsfolk. "We're happy to protect ya anytime! Ain't that right, everyone?"

Wild cheers erupted from the crowd, who began chanting Presea's name. Contented, the Mayor

smiled and looked back at the crowd.

"All right, everyone. There are boxes of supplies in front of Raine's statue. The doctors will be handing out medicine, and Alba and the City Watch will be rationing out food and clothing. Time to get moving!"

The crowd disbanded after hearing the Mayor's words. After seeing everybody off, Neil let out a small sigh.

"I'm sorry. I knew we should have cracked down harder on them back when they were in Palmacosta."

"Is that their base of operations?" asked Presea. Neil nodded.

"Apparently, it was an organization formerly established to protect the Sylvarantis. It was founded by a man who claimed to be a descendant of the Sylvarant Dynasty in Palmacosta. They pose no real threat, but the Palmacosta Army has been keeping close watch on them. They're basically a bunch of radicals pushing for the unification and liberation of Sylvarant."

"The liberation of Sylvarant? What does that mean?"

"They mean preventing any and all interference from the Tethe'allans."

"Even relief efforts?"

"Yes. Any and all forms of intervention."

"How ridiculous." The Mayor scratched his head anxiously. "Without their aid, there are numerous cities and towns that won't be able to operate. Luin is no different in that regard. In Sinoa Lake, the fisheries are yielding next to nothing, and with the absence of rain, the water level is steadily falling. How could anyone even think about refusing aid at a time like this?"

"The Vanguards used to be so peace-loving. They never seemed to even mention the Sylvarant Dynasty and were practically a glorified charity organization. What could have possibly changed them?"

"I'll inform Regal about this matter. I'll also bring this up at the Lezareno Headquarters just in case."

"Good thinking. The Lezareno Company has helped reconstruct Sylvarant in many ways. They'll likely become a target in the near future."

Presea nodded emphatically. Then she walked over to Genis who was standing restlessly next to Neil and took his hand.

"Presea? What are you—"

"Genis, thank you for earlier. If you hadn't stood up to the Vanguards like that, things could have gotten a lot worse."

"Oh, it's not a big deal. I just did what I had to." Genis blushed with an air of

embarrassment.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

Genis puffed his chest out and answered with great gusto. "Of course!"

"If you find out something about Lloyd… please let me know."

Genis' face became gravely serious.

"Of course! You can count on me to find him. I am his best friend, after all."

"I suppose that's true."

Presea smiled gently at Genis, feeling a glimmer of hope she had not felt in some time.

CHAPTER 5

ARM IN ARM

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When considering the overall scale of the Lezareno Company itself, which had a huge global presence, the actual building that served as its headquarters seemed oddly small. There was a rooftop garden at the top of the building and in the middle of it lay a small gravestone surrounded by flowers. All employees were allowed to enter this area, but hardly anyone ever did so. Everyone associated with the company and all its employees knew how important this place was for a certain man.

The name on the gravestone read "Alicia Combatir." It was the name of a young girl who fell into a forbidden love affair with the young company President, only to have been torn from him by a cruel twist of fate, and ultimately lost her life.

Even as the former President and current Chairman of the company, Regal Bryant continued to visit the grave whenever he had the time. And he would speak to it of his current path in life and what it all meant to him.

If he closed his eyes, Regal could still recall it all so vividly. Her faint smile. Her sweet voice. For Regal, Alicia was his light, his everything. And now that she was gone, it was tearing him apart.

Alicia was the one who taught Regal how to live his life of his own accord, rather than just following the rails his father had laid before him. She still lived inside Regal's heart, guiding him and lighting the way forward.

"There you are, Regal!"

Regal was sitting down in front of the gravestone speaking to Alicia as usual when he noticed George approaching him. Regal let out a faint laugh and turned to meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to talk to Alicia for a bit."

"Sir, you'll catch a cold in this dreadful weather."

George frowned upon seeing him without a jacket.

"I needed some time to calm myself down," murmured Regal in a self-deprecating fashion before he stood up.

"I understand. But it is starting to get rather cold, sir."

Regal's face clouded. The unusually cold weather in the region was starting to weigh heavily on his mind. Something was indeed gravely wrong with the whole situation, and there was no telling when it would stop.

"That's true. Whatever happened to the island of everlasting summer?"

"The number of tourists that visit is starting to decrease as well."

From the edge of the roof, Regal looked toward the sandy beach of Altamira. Usually there would be numerous colorful parasols lining the beachside as far as the eye can see, like flowers in full bloom, but there were none to be seen now. It would probably be a matter of time before the number of customers at the casinos and amusement parks would start to decline as well.

All this, because of the blasted World Regeneration.

Everything has changed drastically since the two separate worlds became one. The map, the sea routes, even the flow of people changed. And then there was the abnormal weather.

Regal knew that Altamira was not the only one suffering from these dreadful weather conditions. As a global company with numerous business enterprises all around the world, the Lezareno Company was able to garner plenty of info from various locations. In business, you had to be up on world affairs if you wanted to succeed. But things were quite hard to handle with such drastic changes happening all around the globe.

Moreover, the absurd weather condition was not the only problem they had to handle. For Regal, there was another problem that was much more dire: the conflict between Tethe'allans and Sylvarantis.

A unified form of government did not exist in Sylverant, since it was a civilization in decline. With the environment deteriorating along with the dwindling levels of mana, it was inevitable for Sylvarant to fall behind Tethe'alla both politically and economically.

This predicament served as the basis for the discrimination that was to follow. The tragic mindset of people discriminating against Half-elves—for being born from a Human and an Elf, or an Elf and a Half-elf—was eating away at people's hearts.

"Alicia, what should I do? What can I do to help the situation?" Regal asked this constantly.

But despite all the power and influence he had as a company President, Regal was but one man.

And there were limits to what he could do. How could he alone twist a warped world back into its original shape?

Regal closed his eyes as if in deep thought. George called out to him.

"Sir, I insist. You don't look well."

"Oh, I'm all right. Nothing will come from lamenting my own helplessness, after all. By the way, George, didn't you have something you wanted to tell me?"

Regal pulled himself together and turned towards George, whose face was painted with a grim expression.

"Y—Yes sir. Director Hathaway wanted to come see you and is waiting at the office."

"Hathaway? I thought he was at the Meltokio branch."

"Apparently he took the high-speed transport here. He said he won't leave until he talks to you."

Regal now understood why George's expression was so grim.

Hathaway was the one who spearheaded the anti-Regal faction in the company. He was also the one who rallied against Regal for holding dual posts as the president and the chairman after the World Regeneration.

Without even being told, Regal already knew what Hathaway was here for. Probably the same thing they've discussed countless times already, regarding the management policies of Lezareno and also about Regal's stance on Sylvarant.

Trying to find common ground with Hathaway on this matter was going to be a wasted effort, and Regal understood that. Regal sought to save Sylvarant by taking a stance against the cursed Exphere stone. It may have seemed more like a personal agenda than anything else, but those who were on the Journey of Regeneration understood completely. The long and short of the conflict, though, was that Regal did not have enough evidence to convince the Board of Directors as the Manager of the company. And Hathaway was still raw about it.

The view of Altamira from the Chairman's room was beautiful, as if all the stars in sky were spread in a blanket across the ground. Regal looked out of the window and took a sip of his cold tea. But he curled his lips and made an unpleasant face immediately upon tasting it. It was actually scalding hot.

"Haven't you had enough of me yet?"

Regal shook his head to Hathaway's inquiry.

"I do believe that's my line."

Hathaway smiled wryly. Regal forced a smile back.

It was around sundown when Regal finally got the time to meet with Hathaway. Undeterred by the long wait, Hathaway presented himself in a calm manner. Regal could tell he possessed a refined

sort of dignity that few men could boast.

"Surely you must have some inkling of what I am about to say, don't you sir?"

"You've made it abundantly clear that you oppose my policies several times already. And I do not deny there is some truth to your argument."

Hathaway straightened himself and looked straight towards Regal, eyes calm but unblinking.

"Indeed. Our company is backing Sylvarant far more than it really should. I am not implying, of course, that we should not be charitable or altruistic in our doings. From the standpoint of our corporate image, it can only help. But the fact still stands that most of our revenue comes from people living in former Tethe'alla. Continued support of the Sylvaranti is just bad for business. Don't you see?"

"I do. But there's another way to look at it. The Sylvaranti have potential purchasing power. At this rate, their consumer base will soon be on par with that of Tethe'alla. I think it is ultimately in the company's best interests to market ourselves to them now and think of it as a future investment that will yield a much greater return."

"There are limits to what we can do. Despite our company's status as a major multi-national corporation and the wealth of its President, we can't save everyone."

Regal fell silent. Hathaway did have a point.

"With all due respect, if you must insist on prioritizing the expansion of our sales channel in Sylvarant at any cost, we have our own ideas about—"

At that moment, all the lights in the room shut down, cutting Hathaway's tirade short. Both Regal and Hathaway looked up at the ceiling almost reflexively.

"A blackout?"

"Sure looks like it."

Regal stood up and walked towards the window. The beautiful city of Altamira was now pitch black. It seemed like the whole city had the power outage.

"It seems strange. It should have switched to the spare off-grid power system by now…"

"I'll go take a look at it."

Hathaway stood up and carefully started moving around the dark room. But before he got to the entrance, George came running in, arms flailing in a panic.

"Sir!"

"George, what's wrong?"

George held up the lantern and recognizing that Hathaway was standing before him, he bowed down hastily.

"Pardon me, sir!"

"George, did something happen?"

George put the lantern down on the desk and looked toward Regal.

"I'm sorry for the interruption. Due to the cold front, the electric power system in Altamira is down. We are working to restore it as quickly as possible, but it will take some time before it is fully repaired."

"What about our off-grid power system?"

"It appears to be down as well, sir."

"Forgive me for saying so, Regal, but isn't our heating and cooling system also electrically generated?" Hathaway made a stern look. "According to the weather forecast, it may snow tonight. At this rate, the oncoming cold will spell certain disaster for the city of Altamira."

George nodded in agreement.

"The city of Altamira is known for its tropical weather. We have neither the resources nor the equipment to protect against the cold. Our heating system is basically just a cheap makeover we did to our cooling system, which probably is what strained the power grid. Even if the lights do come back on, the heating system itself may be shot."

George was certainly right. Since no one had predicted snow in a district known for its tropical weather, the city of Altamira had almost no defense whatsoever against the cold.

"Wait, George. I think we still have the merchandise to be sent over to the sky resort in Flanoir left in our warehouse at the harbor. We need to get out there and distribute everything we can to our citizens that may help fight against the cold!"

Regal reached out for the briefcase sitting on the desk as he finished his sentence. Among the documents he'd gone over during the day time, he remembered seeing one that listed all the Lezareno cargo that was stored at the Altamira harbor. Relying on the small light of the lantern, Regal found the document he was looking for and flicked the edge of it.

"According to this document, we have clothing from our apparel label that is still left at the harbor. If we can't rely on the heater, let's do our best to distribute the clothes. We can probably use some of our camping equipment, too. Spare nothing. We'll give anything that might help!"

"Yes, sir."

"Also, let's try to restore the power system as soon as we can. Darkness certainly isn't going to help matters much."

"I've already made arrangements. I'll keep you updated on our progress."

"Chairman, there seems to be some sort of commotion outside," Hathaway said as he looked outside of the office.

Regal and George looked at each other. The three of them listened carefully and heard some voices arguing.

"It don't think it's on this floor."

George took up his lantern again and raised a hand as he went out towards the hallway, motioning for everyone else to wait. As he watched George leave, all the worst case scenarios about what could have been going on were already running through Regal's mind.

Altamira is known for being a popular seaside resort. Unlike other cities, it is divided into districts that are entirely separated from each other, and they use the elemental railway to move from one district to another. This device was an interesting sort of gimmick as it did make Altamira distinct from other cities, but in times of emergency it made it quite difficult to navigate people reliably.

Of course, they had run simulations for all kinds of scenarios, and even secured an underground passage for emergency evacuation. But with the power system currently down, it would be extremely difficult to evacuate people through the passage. The emergency lights were supposedly on a different system than the main one, but given that there were no concrete reports yet, it was assumed that those were likely down as well. And even then, it would be necessary to use the emergency floats to travel between the different districts.

"Sir, George is back," called out Hathaway.

Regal looked up and saw George come flying into the room in a tizzy. George pointed towards the hallway with a stern look.

"It's an emergency! There's a fire near the main gate area!"

"What!?"

Regal's expression ran pale at the news.

"The commotion we heard earlier was our employees responding to the fire and preparing the floats to mobilize near the main gate area. We're expecting a more detailed report on the situation soon."

"What happened to the fire extinguishers?"

"They should still be operational, but we don't know for sure."

After reflecting on the conundrum for a while, Regal made up his mind.

"Hathaway, stay here and handle the situation. George, work with Hathaway and see if you can find out what's happening in Altamira."

"But sir, what will you do?"

Hathaway looked anxiously at Regal.

"I'll go check out the main gate area through the underground passage."

"Are you really going by yourself? It's too dangerous!"

"I'll have my Exphere with me. I'll be quite alright. Besides, I'll head right back once I've gotten to the bottom of what's going on. I'm going to borrow your lantern for a while."

Regal left the room in a hurry, knowing that if he hung around any longer Hathaway and George would try to stop him. But upon entering the hallway, Regal noticed that all the elevators were out of order. He had anticipated this, however, and used the fire escape stairs and headed towards the underground passage.

The underground passage beneath the Lezareno Company connected all the important bases of each district. The region where the main gate was located was directly connected to the basement ground of the Lezareno Hotel. By the time Regal reached the first floor of the hotel, the lobby was already a sea of chaos.

Regal caught one of the doormen and asked him for the current status quo.

According to him, blackouts had brought all the operations of the hotel to a standstill, and the employees were currently running around doing their best to help those who were trapped in the elevators and elsewhere in the hotel. Worse yet, the people left outside were starting to riot because they couldn't get in the hotel with the automatic doors shut down.

The full-scaled glass-walled lobby area was getting extremely cold due to the particular structure that the hotel had. Although they had been handing out blankets in the hotel, the cold was merciless. Even Regal, who was appropriately dressed for the weather, was starting to get chills.

"Sir Regal!"

The hotel Manager saw Regal was here and ran to meet him, his face pale with a cold sweat.

"When did you arrive?"

"I came here through the underground passage. I heard that the guests outside are causing a ruckus. Are there any updates on the situation?"

"I'm afraid nothing's changed. Some guests have been throwing stones at the glass, trying to get in, but it's all tempered glass. There's no way they can break it."

"Isn't there a way to open those automatic doors manually? We have a side door as well. Why aren't we letting them in?"

"Well, about that—" The hotel Manager looked at his feet awkwardly and cleared his throat before speaking up in a muffled voice. "Some of our loyal customers don't want to let these barbaric Sylvaranti in the hotel."

"Are you joking? How do they even know they're from Sylvarant?!"

"There was a huge tour group from Sylvarant that arrived today. So of course we don't mean to assume everyone outside the hotel is a Sylvaranti but, I mean, some of them might be so… you know."

Regal was horrified. That his own employees had sunk this low in a time of crisis was entirely

beyond his comprehension. True enough, the Lezareno Hotel had many loyal customers who were of noble birth. The hotel Manager probably just didn't want to risk upsetting them. But there was a fine line between business and throwing away common decency, and handling the situation like this would only attract criticism besides.

"I'll take full responsibility for the situation. Open the doors and let them in. Now."

"But sir, they're all quite irritable! It'll be dangerous to let them in."

Regal looked outside through the lobby glass. Indeed, the people outside were on the brink of madness. Some of them were throwing rocks, others were making small bonfires out of plants to keep themselves warm. Regal imagined this is probably what the rising smoke he'd seen from corporate headquarters was from. And it was already starting to snow again.

"Send the guests in the lobby upstairs to the second floor. That way they'll at least be protected from harm while the situation is still volatile. After all the guests are led upstairs, seal the lobby staircase until the tension dies down. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

The Manager rushed over to the front desk to give instructions to the other hotel employees.

"Well, now what?" As Regal took a look around, he saw a familiar girl standing outside the front entrance of the hotel.

"Presea!?"

Regal deftly sprinted up to the front door, though Presea did not notice him at first. She appeared to be attempting to engage the group outside. Regal wanted to open the doors as soon as possible, but customers were still clambering up the stairs. Regal began knocking on the window in an attempt to get Presea's attention.

It took a few tries, but eventually Presea took notice and turned around. Her expression brightened immediately once she met Regal's gaze. She turned back around and appeared to yell something to the violent crowd. Whatever she said, it appeared to reach the audience, as the commotion began to die down and some of the more violent members of the crowd managed to contain themselves.

One man began lining people in an orderly fashion in front of the doors, and another woman was rounding up the children to move towards the back of the bushes to avoid the cold sea breeze. A couple of young men were relaying buckets of seawater to extinguish the fires around the area.

Regal stood in utter amazement. Then Presea ran up to him and made a gesture of opening the door with both hands. It looked like they were ready to come in. Regal nodded and looked back towards the lobby.

"Manager! Are we good to go yet?"

"It'll be just a little longer! We're guiding the last group of customers upstairs."

"Gather all the available staff near the entrance. Make sure they all have blankets,

gowns, and anything that may help protect against the cold. Have them hand them out to the guests that are coming in and lead them back to the lobby, one by one."

With Regal's command, everyone readied themselves at their stations, taking blankets and gowns in their hand and prepared to let in the restless guests that were outside.

"Evacuation complete! Let's move!" shouted one of the hotel staff. Regal released the door stop and with the help of his staff, pried the doors open manually.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please don't rush. Get in line and enter in an orderly fashion, please!"

Presea shouted at the teeming crowd. The guests nodded and slowly gathered into the hotel as instructed. Regal ran up beside Presea, who was standing near the entrance.

"So you've come back, Presea."

"Yes, I came back a little while ago. But right when I entered the district the power went out."

"I heard that there was a riot outside. Are you hurt at all?"

"No, I'm fine."

Presea pointed toward the nearby shops where the shutters have been broken. All the glass in the displays and windows had been shattered.

"That looks awful."

"The people from the Sylvarant tour group caught the thieves who were stealing from those stores."

"We couldn't stop them by ourselves, but she helped us get a hold of the culprits."

The middle-aged woman standing in line right next to them overheard them and joined their conversation.

"I bet everyone was stressed because of this cold weather and darkness. Though we're used to darkness at night in Sylvarant, of course."

The woman walked into the hotel laughing. The old man in line after her also decided to strike a conversation with them.

"Heya there, ain't you the President or Chairman or somethin' of this here company? Then it's true. Yer the spittin' image of what I imagined from what this little lady told us!"

"What do you mean by that?"

The old man's face beamed as he continued to speak in praise of Regal.

"Well, lessee here. It was startin' to look more and more likely that we'd just get left out in the cold and freeze ourselves to popsicles. But through it all, this here gal reassured us that help

was on the way and that the higher ups of this fine city would come to our rescue. And above all else, she helped us to quit bickerin' and hollerin' and help each other out during such a tough time!"

"Glad to hear it. I do apologize for the wait."

"Oh, hell, for an old man like me this was the most exciting thing that's happened in years!"

The old man laughed a raspy, wheezing sort of guffaw, and shuffled slowly inside.

"Looks like you've made quite the impact," said Regal, with a proud smile. "Thank you, Presea. I apologize that you had to take initiative to do something which should have been done on our end in the first place."

"It's fine, really. It was a large-scale blackout. It isn't out of the question that you might not have the resources to be able to respond quickly to something like this and so I just assumed you had your hands full. But I believed until the very end that the Lezareno Company would never abandon people in need."

Presea looked towards the line of people who were waiting to go inside the hotel.

"As I expected, there were several people who wouldn't take me seriously because of my appearance. But there were people in the Sylvarant tour group whom I had helped before with the Alicia Fund, and they believed me. And when you showed up, people really started listening."

"I see."

Suddenly, Regal was reminded of all the arguments he'd had with Hathaway.

True enough, Regal, or even the entire Lezareno Company, would not be able to change the world by their strength alone. But if he had learned anything, it was that the efforts they took to that end were not a waste. Anything done to better the world will inevitably cause change. And even actions that seem insignificant at first all add up eventually. It seemed idealistic, but Regal knew it was true.

Some things in life simply cannot be changed. This was a tried and proven axiom. But any efforts taken to make a better future are never in vain. There was a certain comrade that Regal met on the Journey of Regeneration who taught him this very lesson.

"I wonder whatever became of Lloyd?"

"I wish I could say. I asked about him in Luin, but there's still no trace of him to be found."

"Hmm."

Regal had ordered Lezareno Company's investigation branch to search for Lloyd the moment he heard word of his disappearance. So far though, it's been nothing but dead ends. All Regal could really do was work his hardest to maintain order in the city, so that when they did find Lloyd, he'd be able to hold his head high, knowing he did him proud.

"Sir Regal!"

The hotel Manager approached them, holding two sets of blankets.

"Shall we return to the Headquarters now?"

"Not yet. I want to talk to Presea about her work in Luin. I'll be here for a little while longer."

"Then for god's sake, please take these blankets. It's terribly cold in here."

Regal tucked the blankets under his arm and went inside the hotel with Presea. The front door had been open for a significantly long time at this point and so the lobby was freezing cold. The two of them wrapped themselves in their blankets and sat down on the floor, leaning against the glass tiredly.

"Quite the ordeal this has been, huh?"

"You said it."

"How was Luin? Is everybody doing well?"

"Everyone's fine, but there are more and more people showing up who speak ill of the Tethe'allans. There's an organization called the Vanguards who are deliberately trying to rouse the rabble and get them to discriminate."

"This is the first I've heard of these so-called 'Vanguards.' I'll see if I can get my people working on getting more information about them."

"I don't think they should be ignored, in any case."

"Agreed. I'll be sure to look into it."

Presea nodded and took out the lace handkerchief from her pouch, and handed it to Regal. Regal unwrapped it carefully and found an amulet wrapped inside.

"What's this?"

"Genis gave it to me when I met him in Luin. Raine apparently found it when she was investigating some ruins. She thinks someone from the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak lost it, so they're trying to find out who the owner is. I was told that Zelos might know more about it if we let him take a look at it, but I'm going to be so busy with the construction in Ozette that I won't be able to give it to him in Meltokio. Can I ask you to take it to him in my stead?"

"Of course! I was planning on meeting with Sheena myself soon. If I give it to her, I'm sure she can deliver it to the Chosen."

"Thank you."

"Come to think of it, the reconstruction work is starting in Ozette soon, right?"

"Yes, finally. I'm so glad that Our Majesty gave us the okay to begin." Presea smiled sadly. "I do have a lot of painful memories there, but it is my hometown, after all."

"Alicia would be pleased too."

"I know."

"I heard that our comrades from the journey will be helping out with the reconstruction as well. With any luck, Lloyd will turn up by then, too."

Regal was far from the only one who hoped so. All of his comrades felt the exact same way. Only time would tell if Lloyd was safe.

CHAPTER 6

UNREQUITED FEELINGS

届かぬ想い

"Thanks so much for coming."

Sheena Fujibayashi flashed a faint, reserved smile as she exchanged a handshake with Regal.

"So you're the Chairman now, huh? You sure look the part."

Sheena stared up and down at the handsome man in front of her. She could tell that his well-tailored garb was probably a custom-made suit from Noale, a luxury fashion brand that was rather en vogue these days. The suit he wore was covered in a lavish gold thread and had several diamonds around the lapel, which glistened so brightly Sheena had to avert her eyes. His long hair was styled meticulously and probably took an ungodly amount of time to set, and whenever he moved it was easy to catch a whiff of his cologne. Sheena could tell it was likely a type of cologne for men released by the same brand, which carried the pleasant aroma of citrus and cardamom and was called "Gentle", which was marketed specifically for dignified executives and likely cost more gald than Sheena had ever seen in her life. The Noale fashion brand, of course, operated under the Lezareno Company umbrella.

Regal forced a wry smile to Sheena's alluring gaze. His teeth were almost impossibly white.

"Well, I certainly can't go around wearing my prison uniform in a place like this."

"True enough."

Sheena looked around the room.

They were at the Chairman's office on the top floor of the Lezareno Company Headquarters building in Altamira. As expected from such a huge enterprise, their Chairman's room was furnished

with the finest luxuries available. It had shining marble floors, radiant amber-colored mahogany desks, a fountain pen with a platinum finish, and a memo stand which used the finest paper from Mizuho brand, not to mention a chandelier made from emblazoned crystal and an abstract painting that Sheena didn't quite "get" but probably cost way more than she could imagine. It was all absurdly high-class, and a look into a world that Sheena felt she would never know. Regal was right, a prison uniform would be an eyesore in a room so impossibly lavish. It was kind of hard to believe that that Regal had been wearing that dingy prison uniform for the entire time during the Journey of Regeneration.

"We may as well relax if we're going to chat, don't you think?" Regal gestured towards a plush looking sofa. Sheena nodded and sat down. The cushioning was exquisite and offered perfect support—she could tell it was probably stuffed with the feathers of rare, endangered birds. This sofa alone probably also cost more money than Sheena had ever seen in her life. She decided it would probably be best to stop thinking about how much things in this room cost, as it was starting to make her uncomfortable.

"I have to admit, I feel a bit nervous being in such a fancy room like this one. You know how clumsy I am, and I'm not exactly the classiest girl I know."

"Nonsense! Make yourself at home. I insist."

Regal sat down on the sofa across from Sheena.

"I know you visit the King frequently, and have been to the mansion of the Chosen several times. Both places are said to be quite luxurious. My homely little office cannot compare."

"If you say so. When you put it that way though, it just makes me feel even more out of place."

Regal laughed loudly, both amused and impressed by Sheena's candor.

"Well, fair enough. But I hardly think you're as clumsy or low-class as you make yourself out to be. You're an elegant, refined lass. Besides, it's better to be honest and communicate your unease if that's how you truly feel. Far better than feigning to be in touch with something you're not really in touch with. And honestly, I'm not really that rich anyways," said Regal, as he put his feet on the diamond-encrusted ottoman that was right in front of him.

"You know, all this praise is starting to embarrass me."

Sheena had always thought of Regal as a gentle sort, but complimenting her right to her face like that was enough to make her blush. The fact that he was likely not even aware about how affected he sounded actually made things worse. Must have been a difference in their upbringing, after all.

"Well, I'm sure you don't have any sort of ulterior motive by praising me or anything. But anywho, word is things have been rough for you."

"With the blackouts, you mean?"

Sheena scooted a little closer to him.

"Yep. I hear it was because of some sort of cold wave. I know it's been cold in Altamira lately, but has the temperature really dropped that much?"

"It has. Around sunset it dropped significantly. It was unfathomable."

"I think it has something to do with the balance of Mana."

"Did the spirits say anything about it?"

Sheena fell silent for a moment, thinking about the experiment she had performed earlier before she dropped by to see Regal.

"Not so long ago, I summoned the spirits at the Elemental Research Laboratory, but they seemed to be just as clueless as we are. They said that maybe there's problem with the flow of Mana which somehow affects the World Tree."

"So nothing but 'maybes', then? No definite answers?"

"Not yet. I thought that the system that was established when Cruxis divided the world into two must have been influencing the world in some way, but that may not be the case after all. The summon spirits would have known if it were somehow related to Cruxis."

"Indeed. Their system required the use of artificial spirit energy."

"I'm the only one who can summon spirits, and so I really want to help those working at the Elemental Research Laboratory. But I just haven't had the time lately."

"You were commissioned by His Majesty to be a negotiator with Sylvarant, right?"

Sheena cast her eyes downward, self-consciously twirling her hair.

"Y—yeah. I was one of those, you know, imperial envoys or whatever you call them. I was surprised when they asked me to do it, honestly."

"I think you're the exactly right person to ask for these kinds of things."

"Well that makes one of us. But I hope you're right. I want to help out Sylvarant as best I can."

For Sheena, Sylvarant was a special place. As someone who had jumped into the deteriorating world of Sylvarant to murder Colette the Chosen, she knew firsthand that people living in Sylvarant were no different than those living in Tethe'alla, but were forced to live in much harsher conditions.

For the Sylvaranti, Sheena was the bearer of destruction. Yet, the Sylvaranti welcomed her, unaware of the fact that she was the one who would bring about their downfall. To Sheena, who had been feeling so alienated in Tethe'alla, Sylvarant was a haven.

"You know how I'm like, the abandoned child of the Mizuho village who is also a summoner? People were always prejudiced against me because of that. But the people in Sylvarant weren't like that since they know anything about my past, and so they were really nice to me. I really wanna repay them somehow."

"I think you've done enough."

Regal smiled quietly. Sheena gave a sigh of relief seeing his composed smile. She knew she could trust him, and his encouragement warmed her heart.

"Maybe. But I know I have to work harder. You know how Tethe'allans have a tendency to look down upon Sylvaranti? That prejudice is causing all kinds of tension lately, and I bet someone is agitating it deliberately."

"Are you talking about that group of radicals? The Vanguards, I believe they were called?"

Sheena's eyes widened. How could he have known?

"So you know about them already?"

Regal shook his head.

"No, I just heard about them from Presea. It seemed like our investigation unit was able to find some information on them, though. They're allegedly an anti-Tethe'alla armed forces unit."

"Sounds about right. I'm doing research on them too. Currently their organization isn't that big, but they're drawing a lot of die-hards into their ranks these days."

"If an organization like theirs and the radicals from Tethe'alla were to clash, it could spark another war between Tethe'alla and Sylvarant. It would be like the Ancient War all over again!"

"We have to avoid that at all costs. The World Tree has only just started budding." Sheena creased her nose and let out a frustrated sigh, eyes cast downward. "I'm so sick of this! Why do things like this keep on happening?! What is it for? What are we fighting for?! Why can't we just have the happy ending we've always dreamed of?"

Regal nodded sympathetically as Sheena picked up a tissue made of pure gold leaf from the small table in front of her and blew her nose softly. "By the way," he said, resuming his conversation. "Aren't you forgetting the main reason why you're here?"

Sheena pulled herself together and sat bolt upright, slapping a hand on her forehead as she realized what she had came here to do.

"Oh, right! Almost forgot about that!"

Sheena straightened her back, took out the personal handwritten letter from the King of Tethe'alla, and handed it to Regal reverently.

"This is a letter addressed to Duke Bryant from the 18th King of Tethe'alla."

"Thank you very much, Sheena."

Regal held it with a solemn expression on his face and gracefully opened the letter. After quickly skimming through it, Regal fell silent, closed his eyes for a moment, and gave a disappointed sigh.

"As I thought. There's still no sign of Lloyd yet."

The letter was a progress report from the Mizuho villagers, who had been ordered by the 18th King of Tethe'alla to find Lloyd Irving.

It was odd for a King who ruled over the entire domain of Tethe'alla to put all his energy into a search for but a single swordsman, who was merely a comrade of the Chosen who had worked to regenerate the world. But the King had to abide the wishes of the Chosen from Sylvarant and Tethe'alla, Duke Bryant, the Imperial Research Academy, and the Mizuho villagers. And yet despite all their efforts, they still had no clue where Lloyd could have been. Such was the difficulty in this situation.

"I don't mean to cause you worry, but in the event that Lloyd is dead, we do have the means to find him. Though I pray with all my heart for his safety."

No matter how she thought about it, Sheena couldn't believe that Lloyd, the Lloyd Irving she knew so well, could just disappear without notice and cause such worry and heartache to the people that were supposed to be his friends. She wanted to believe, deep down, that there must have been some reason behind it, but she was at a loss to find one. The thought that something might have happened to him made her so anxious that she could have practically bolted out the door and started looking for him on her own right away.

But Sheena was now chief of Mizuho. Her subordinates were already doing their best to find him. Unless the circumstances were dire, Sheena could not act based on her own personal feelings. Of course, for Sheena personally, the circumstances may have been life or death—but she still couldn't use that as an excuse to abandon her position.

"I'm so frustrated. I feel like my skin is crawling, just standing here dawdling like this. I wish I could just run out and go find him."

"I understand how you feel, believe me. But think about what Lloyd himself would want. Our job is to watch over and protect the world so that it doesn't fall back into chaos. If we were to neglect our duties, even if we were to find Lloyd, how could we show our faces to him?"

"You're right. I know it. But I just--" Sheena stammered, biting her lip a bit. "I just can't help how I feel sometimes."

Sheena forced a quiet laugh, and Regal smiled along.

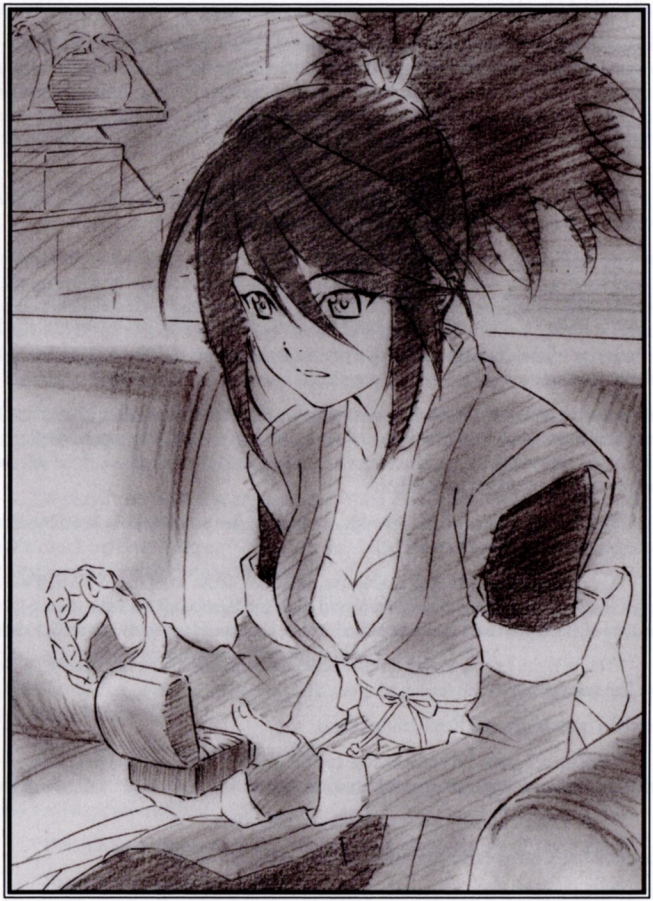
"Well then, I guess I'd better excuse myself for now. Will I see you next at the groundbreaking ceremony that's going to take place in Ozette?"

"Wait. There's actually a favor I wanted to ask of you."

Regal took out a small velvet-lined box from the inside pocket of his suit.

"What is that? Are you trying to propose to me or something?!"

Regal rolled his eyes and sighed. "Don't be ridiculous! Presea gave it to me. Apparently, Raine found this at one of the ruins."



"The ruins, huh?"

Sheena gave a grim smile as she imagined Raine in her typical crazed "ruins mode."

"Can I open it?"

"Please do."

Sheena opened the lid slowly. Inside there was an old, beat up amulet. It was the sort of thing that the pious followers of the Church of Martel would buy for protection on their journeys.

"Huh. I thought for sure there was going to be an engagement ring or something in here."

"Will you come off it already?" Regal sighed. "We're looking for the owner of that amulet. We think it's someone from the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak, but we don't know for sure. The Church of Martel likely has a list of people who have them, since they are all custom-made. I was hoping you could deliver it to the Chosen of Tethe'alla."

Sheena snorted half-jokingly, half in disgust. He meant Zelos, of course. "So you want that idiot Chosen to do the research. Fine, I'll handle it."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Sheena smiled as she gently closed the lid of the small box. It was rare, but she was occasionally touched by Raine's softer side.

Altamira was a city that was built to expand over the sea itself. There were separate districts for businesses, recreational facilities, residential areas, and so on, and each one was connected by a maritime train system called the Elemental Railway.

A cold wind tussled Sheena's hair as she left the Headquarters via the Elemental Railway. It made her shiver, and she rubbed her arms together to keep warm.

Sheena didn't care much for the cold. She couldn't believe it had snowed during the blackout earlier that week. That Altamira had been hit with such a cold wave seemed impossible, but now that she was here, feeling the cold north wind beating down on her and piercing her like freezing knives, she couldn't deny it was the truth.

"What should I do?" Sheena asked herself. "Oh Lloyd, where the hell are you? If you were here, I bet you'd know just what to do."

The Elemental Railway slid across the tracks and arrived quietly at the block where the port was located. Sheena got off the train and started to walk towards the port when she sensed someone running parallel to her.

It was one of her ninja subordinates.

Sheena walked calmly towards the area behind the port warehouse. Immediately after, a messenger

from the Mizuho village appeared before her.

"Chief!"

Being called by such a formal title was enough to make Sheena wince. She never got used to being called the "Chief." It had been some time since the former Chief had passed on the Igaguri Style to her but the more time passed, the more she felt unqualified to be the head of the village. The Igaguri themselves didn't seem to mind terribly much, but she still felt like a fraud.

"What's the situation, Saizo?"

Sheena tried her best to look calm, composed, and in control but in actuality her heart was racing with the hope that it might have been some new news about Lloyd. Saizo, who was kneeling below her feet, spoke at last.

"It's a message from the Igaguri Elder. We've discovered an ideal new location for Mizuho."

Sheena gasped involuntarily. This was an unexpected report. But it was a subject of grave importance for the Mizuho villagers.

The village of Mizuho was hidden from sight. Only the villagers knew where it was and that was the way it had to be. But during the Journey of Regeneration, Sheena had brought Lloyd and his comrades into the village without prior preparations. They needed to change the location of the village as soon as possible.

"Are we going to start moving soon?"

"No. We wanted you to take a look at the new location beforehand and then discuss the schedule."

"All right. Thanks for coming all the way here to tell me. I need to go meet with the King after this, so I'll return to the village after my visit to Meltokio."

"Understood."

"By the way, did you find anything about Lloyd Irving?"

"There is still nothing new to report concerning Lloyd."

"I see," said Sheena, solemnly casting her head downwards. "Thanks."

"Farewell."

Saizo disappeared, melting into the shadows—a common Igaguri Style ninja technique. Once she was sure that she could no longer sense Saizo, Sheena allowed herself to let her guard down. She leaned against the wall of the warehouse and took a deep breath.

Still no word about Lloyd. The weight of that disappointment was enough to crush her. She could only hope that Lloyd, her dear trusted friend, was safe out there.

The world she knew had been thrown out of balance completely. But she was powerless to do

anything about it. Sheena was the type who had the utmost confidence in her abilities and could do exactly what needed to be done—when she had the proper direction, that is. But in times when the way forward wasn't clear, and she wasn't sure how to handle the problem at hand, she felt paralyzed, utterly frozen in stasis and powerless to change anything. She was never quite able to articulate these feelings of helplessness and loneliness.

"When did I become so weak?" Sheena asked herself. She had always been alone before she had set out on the Journey of Regeneration. With the way she was living though, she never had the time to feel lonely. She just had to keep moving forward.

But that was all before she met some truly irreplaceable friends on her journey, and made peace with herself at last. Even the land of Tethe'alla, which was at first alien and cold to her, eventually became a special place that she treasured in her heart. These fond memories and accomplishments gave Sheena the strength to move forward.

But in another sense, these memories had also rendered her powerless.

If she had remained alone the whole time, she never would have felt the anxiety and fear that she did now. With Lloyd missing, Sheena was a nervous wreck. What if another friend of hers disappeared while they were apart? Something could be happening right now to someone she cared for dearly, and she wouldn't even know about it.

"Aghhh, I can't take this anymore!"

Sheena slapped her cheeks, trying to compose herself. She was out of her mind with worry, and not to mention unbearably lonely. But even if the journey was over, she knew her friends would be with her until the end. Wherever they were, she had faith that her friends were working hard, doing what they needed to be doing to make sure the world was at peace. And ultimately, she knew that there must have been some reason for why Lloyd up and disappeared the way he did. But now her spirits had been weakened, and she felt scared and vulnerable. It was the same sort of anxiety that she had overcome during the Journey of Regeneration, but now it was back in full force.

Sheena had to wonder, what is a friend? Is a friend someone who's there for you to rely on when you're feeling weak? No. When each member of a friendship is able to stand on their own, you can believe in each other no matter how great the distance between you might be. Sheena knew she had to do her part by living strong, on her own. And by doing so, she knew that she could support her friends in the same way, even though she was far apart.

Suddenly, Sheena heard a small bell ring. Its sound was comforting and soothing, the sound of encouragement which Sheena's first friend had given her upon showing resolve. Sheena closed her eyes and took a moment to thank her dear old friend, Corrine.

The passenger boat from Altamira to Meltokio was quite empty. It used to be so busy they had to provide extra departures, but they were recently forced to cut back due to the changes in the environment and the abnormal weather conditions. Watching the city of Altamira getting smaller and smaller in the distance, Sheena took a small sigh.

"Found you, Sheena."

She heard a familiar voice behind her—one she had known since childhood. Unfazed, Sheena kept her eyes locked on Altamira, and didn't even look behind her to respond.

"Is that you, Orochi? I would have come back of my own accord, you know. There's no need for you to worry."

Sheena answered sullenly—understandable, considering that Orochi was Sheena's watchdog. It was questionable to have a watchdog monitoring the Chief, but there was a sound reasoning behind it.

When the news of Lloyd's disappearance came in, Sheena tried to search for him of her own accord. Concerned with her brazen attitude, the magistrate Tiga ordered Orochi to "escort" Sheena. But since the visit to Altamira was with Regal, Orochi let Sheena go by herself. Of course, it wasn't standard procedure for a subordinate to be giving permission to his master, but these were special circumstances.

"That isn't why I was looking for you. I heard Saizo's report and wanted to talk to you about something."

Orochi stood next to Sheena, looking a bit flustered. Sheena stared back at him coldly.

"I see. So you didn't think I'd come back right away then, is that it?"

"We both know that Altamira has limited escape routes due to its geography. Even if you were to hide out there it'd be easy to find where you'd be hiding."

"Just a darn minute! Does that mean that you didn't allow me to travel here because you trusted me?!"

Orochi made a sardonic scowl as Sheena flew into a rage.

"I'm just kidding, relax! Of course I trusted you!"

Sheena composed herself and coughed awkwardly, eyes going from side to side.

"I uh, I see! Well I suppose that's okay."

Sheena looked towards Altamira again. Its lights had now almost entirely faded from view.

"But back to what Saizo had told you earlier. If we're going to move our village, there'll be a considerable amount of work to be done."

"Right."

"We'll have to go back and forth between the two places. But that's going to attract attention."

"Uh huh."

"Sheena!"

Orochi yelled in Sheena's ear and she just about jumped off the boat in surprise.

"The hell's gotten into you, shouting into my ear like that?!"

Orochi shrugged his shoulders and sighed in frustration.

"The hell's gotten into YOU, more like! Are you even listening to me?!"

Sheena averted Orochi's gaze awkwardly.

"Hey now, don't look away. Did you get any new information from Regal? Was there anything about Lloyd that they found?"

Just what you'd expect from him. Or is it because it shows on her face clearly even though she's a ninja? Or both? Sheena leaned against the arm rail in the deck and put her head down.

"I'm disappointed because there was nothing new to report."

"I see." Orochi nodded gravely.

"Our entire information network hasn't even found mention of him anywhere. It's unlikely that he'll be found through conventional means."

"I know, but that's not what bothers me. This whole thing just seems very un-Lloyd. I don't mean to disrespect the guy, but you know how he can be kind of an idiot in both good and bad ways? Well even then, I can't believe he'd go and do something like this."

"So, what are you going to do?"

Orochi suddenly changed the tone in his voice. Sheena tilted her head puzzlingly, for he was speaking in his "childhood friend" tone, and not his usual "I'm on a mission" tone.

"Well, I hope we find him, but—"

"No, you dummy! I'm talking about the future."

Sheena blushed as she realized what he was getting at.

"Wh—what's this about, all of a sudden?"

"If you don't find one for yourself, Tiga will surely be looking for your potential partner. He did tell you he expects you to settle down by the time we finish moving to the new village, did he not?"

"Well, m—maybe I'm just not ready yet!"

Sheena covered her face in embarrassment. She really was in no mood for this discussion right now.

Lloyd was an important comrade, friend, and even a savior to Sheena. But was he more than that?

Her thought process always stopped there. She should stop thinking there, the devil inside her whispered. Life spent following a Mizuho villager would not be easy for him, or anyone.

"I know it's hard to think about, but you can't keep putting this off. What are you going to do in the event that we can't find Lloyd?"

"We're going to find him! Don't you dare say things like that!"

Sheena shouted out in frustration. Orochi stared ahead solemnly.

"If you keep your eyes closed, you'll miss everything that's really important."

"Like what?"

"Like how maybe there's someone out there that watches over you and protects you, while hiding their inner feelings."

Sheena's face instantly went beet red. Could that have been what he really meant? Was he confessing to her? Orochi was her childhood friend, a person she's indebted to, and her subordinate. Sheena believed herself to be pretty perceptive when it came to things like this.

"You know, Orochi, I—"

"I didn't say it was me."

Sheena's head sagged as she let out a defeated sigh. And here she thought she had it all figured out!

"Really!?"

"Yes, really. What 'feelings' could I possibly have to hide from you? There was another guy."

"Wh—what? You know I'm not actually good at these kinds of things! Enough of this, I'm going back to the cabin!"

Sheena hurried away and left the deck area. She knew there was no way someone out there was hiding their feelings and watching over her. For the only one she knew who was watching over someone while hiding their feelings all the while… was Sheena herself.

CHAPTER 7

THE POWER OF FAITH

それでもただ信じる

"It's so damn hot! I'm sweating buckets from my gorgeous face!"

Thus spoke Zelos Wilder as he returned to his hometown at last. It was yet early spring, and the cold weather broke at last, yielding to the warm and pleasant sun—or at least that's how it should have been.

But Meltokio and its surroundings were ungodly hot, so hot just standing in the sun for even a few seconds would cause you to sweat all over. Even considering the shape of the continent and the changes in climate, no matter how you look at it, it was just way too hot.

"Gimmie a break! Don't tell me Meltokio is this friggin' hot, too!"

Noticing Zelos murmuring in disgust, the Priest from the Church of Martel in front of the line bowed humbly towards him.

"I apologize for the inconvenience. The temperature has been rising rapidly even after you've departed. It's quite like summer came early."

"Did I ask for an apology?"

"F—forgive me, sir!"

Humbled by his remark, the Priest appeared to shrink from humiliation. Zelos scratched his cheeks in frustration. What was the world coming to? The World Regeneration completely changed the way the Church of Martel worked. Before the World Regeneration, the Church of Martel could hear the voice of God and thus acted according to what God had told them.

Yes, God had actually existed.

Or rather, not a god, but a goddess named Martel and her angels existed, and they blessed the Chosen with oracles. The Chosen held great power since they had the ability to talk to angels.

However, Cruxis, the group comprised of angels who believed they were the physical manifestation of the mandate of heaven, had since collapsed. The world was no longer under their control, and the being which gave the oracles to the Chosen no longer existed. Consequently, the Chosen had lost a great deal of influence within the church.

From the very start, the Church of Martel in Tethe'alla was split into two factions: the Chosen faction and the Pope faction. The Pope alienated the Chosen and attempted to kill them multiple times, but that signified how much the Chosen faction had powers beyond their grasp. In actuality, they had intended to kill Zelos and then make his younger sister, Seles, into a sort of figurehead. And in the end, the former Pope had dug his own grave, having been found plotting to usurp the throne.

And yet the Chosen's influence had weakened after the World Regeneration. The group of priests who didn't know what had really transpired continued to revere the sacred presence of the Chosen, but the newly elected Pope worked to expand his influence and strengthen his authority in the church after the fall of Cruxis.

But the Chosen were not entirely powerless. Not by a longshot.

Had they told the truth about the World Regeneration, the world would have viewed the Church of Martel with suspicion, and so it was deliberately hidden from the public that the world was dominated by Half-elves called "Angels". Without that knowledge, the general public still believed that the goddess Martel and the angels of Cruxis still existed. As long as people still believed that the goddess was real, they would continue to support the Chosen, and this support gave the Chosen enough political clout to stand up to the Pope.

But even so, the existence of the Chosen was viewed as a hindrance by the higher-ups of the Church of Martel. They had proposed multiple reforms in an effort to weaken their influence.

The reforms that changed the selection for Chosen's personal attendant was one such attempt. In the past, an educated elite priest was selected to serve the Chosen, but this time a neophyte priest who was about as useful as a lost child was set to be appointed as the Chosen's personal assistant.

The Priest who had been assigned to assist Zelos was a newbie who had only recently been admitted into the Priesthood. His name was Toma. For him, the Chosen were like some sort of superhuman race who had powers beyond Human comprehension, so whenever Zelos asked him anything at all, no matter how simple, he couldn't give a coherent answer. Or even worse, felt that he was unworthy to answer because of his position.

"Man, I'd hate to be in your shoes."

"H—Huh?"

"Oh, I'm just thinking out loud. Forget I said anything." Zelos shrugged.

He knew that this would happen if he said anything. And with that, he left Meltokio. He didn't want to just abandon his post, but at the same time didn't feel particularly remorseful.

But of course, he wasn't entirely unsympathetic to the situation at hand, either.

It wasn't that he couldn't throw away his title of the Chosen if he really wanted to. But as bothersome as it could be, his position also came in handy from time to time, and he deemed it a wise investment to hang onto just in case.

After walking through the plaza in Meltokio and walking up the central staircase where the sun was brilliantly shining from the south, he heard screams coming from the Martel Cathedral.

"What was that?"

Zelos stopped to look up towards the cathedral. There appeared to be some kind of crowd near there but he couldn't really tell for sure from his present standpoint.

"I'll go scope it out!"

Without taking heed of Zelos's answer, Toma ran up the stairs toward the crowd. Zelos followed after him slowly. It was way too hot to be running around like a headless chicken after him for what was likely not a big deal anyways.

"Wonder what all the commotion is about. Maybe the heat just has everyone feeling angry?"

Even if that was true, this was a place for sacred prayer. Even the lowest of the low in this town should have enough tact to know not to raise their voices so much inside the church. What could have been going on that was so important that people would forget even their most basic manners?

He figured that whatever was going on, it was probably the Pope's fault, and in fact felt oddly grateful to have an excuse to give him a piece of his mind. Zelos was casually walking up the stairs when Toma came running back towards him.

"M—Master Zelos!"

"Whoa whoa whoa, where's the fire? Relax and tell me what's happening."

"This is awful! Madam Seles is in the cathedral, and—"

"Seles?! Why the hell didn't you just say so in the first place?!"

Seles is Zelos's sister. They used to live apart, but now they reside in the same mansion.

"Well sir, uh, you see it—it seems like the priests under control of the Pope have forced Seles to—"

"To what!?" Zelos grabbed Toma by the collar and shook him wildly, mere centimeters from his own face. "What's going on?! Spill it already!"

Zelos shook Toma even more intensely and Toma went pale, stuttering badly.

"Seles has met with an—an offender and she—she—she—"

"Ugh! You're useless!"

Zelos pushed Toma away and ran up the central staircase.

A huge crowd had gathered in front of the cathedral. Zelos waded through the onlookers and had just reached the entranceway when he found Seles standing in shock in front of the altar. Zelos quickly entered the cathedral and closed the door behind him. He assumed that would be enough to divert the eyes of the curious spectators from whatever was happening inside the church for the time being.

"Zelos!"

Seles looked back towards him, giving a relieved smile upon seeing his face. Zelos frowned and gave a quick glance at his surroundings. The Pope's guards stood defiantly with their backs to the altar. In front of them was Seles, who stood white-faced with fear. Around her stood the soldiers of the royal family who had been entrusted with her escort, with several of them lying on the floor. Her butler, Tokunaga, stood next to her, shielding her from harm. He seemed to be wounded.

"Hey, hey. This doesn't look like the peaceful scene I'd expect from a church."

Zelos glared at the pope's guards as he slowly advanced towards Seles. Seles staggered behind him.

"You came, Zelos," Seles said meekly.

"Seles, can you tell me what happened?"

"I came to the church to pray, but the priests told this woman—" said Seles, pointing towards the old woman who was huddled in the right hand seat, "—that she wasn't fit to be in the church of Tethe'alla and had to leave. When I stood up for her and told them they couldn't say such things, they got enraged at me."

"That's right!" interjected Tokunaga. "They hurled abusive remarks at Madam Seles, saying she was the daughter of sin!"

"They can say whatever they want about me. But I won't have them saying such things to an old woman." Seles bit her lips in frustration. Zelos patted her head gently and winked reassuringly.

"I gotcha. Now just let your big bro handle this, alright?"

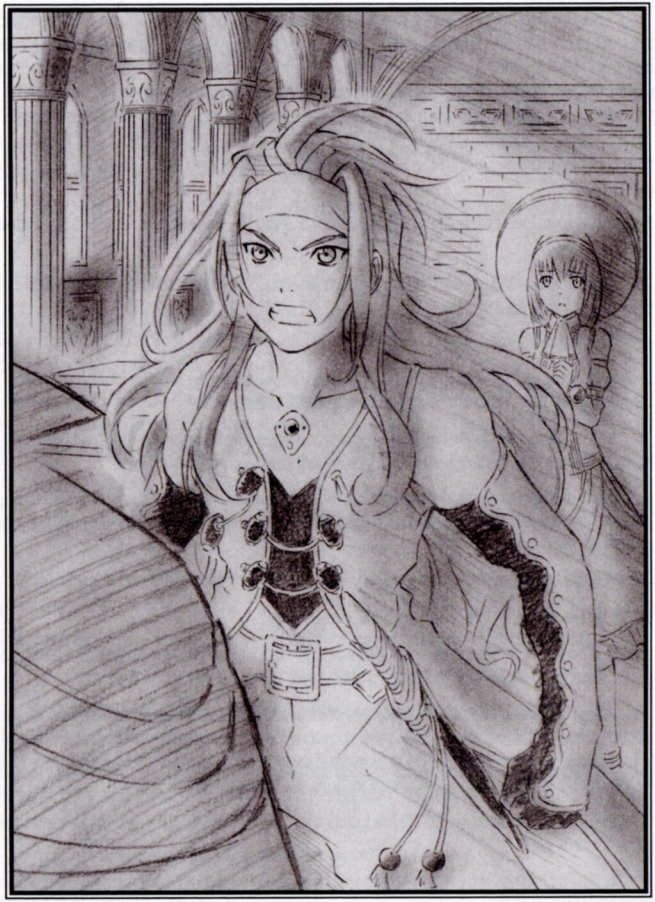
Zelos walked up to the priests, shoulders back, chest puffed out, and waved a hand in the air.

"Alright, I'll make this easy. Who's the wise guy who thought this old woman was unfit to come to this church and worship?"

The priests exchanged glances with each other awkwardly. Then at last, one of the Pope's guards stepped forward and spoke grandly:

"Hah! Who do you think you are, Chosen scum? Get off your high horse!"

Zelos tilted his head to the side and flashed a cocky grin. "Yeah, I'm gonna go ahead and assume



you have no idea just how big a deal I am."

"What?!"

"You got wax in your ears? I'm a Chosen, and you're just some low-life foot soldier. Given your rank and lot in life, normally, you wouldn't deserve to get the time of day from someone like me. But you're lucky that it's me—a man with a kindness that is deeper than the ocean itself, who's generosity knows no bounds—and not an ordinary Chosen. I'm a veritable saint, who is willing to address a lowly being such as yourself and listen to your gibberish, and will still forgive you for your most heinous transgressions. Now then! Fall to your knees and bask in my magnanimity! Try not to piss yourself with excitement though, people work hard enough to keep this place clean as it is."

The Pope's guard closed his fist and grit his teeth into a snarl. "I'm getting pretty fed up with your lip!"

"Hah! Please. You wish I'd put my lips on you." Zelos grinned and then puckered his lips into a mocking kissy-face.

"You son of a—"

One of the guards took up his weapon in anger. Then Zelos suddenly heard a shaky sounding voice that was clearly trying its best to act tough come up behind him.

"Why—Why you insolent fool! This is a sacred site for prayer, and you brazenly bare your fangs at a Chosen! How dare you show your weapons in a place like this!"

Zelos looked back inadvertently and saw Toma scowling menacingly at the guard while trying to hide his fear— and from his shaking hands and tense breathing, it wasn't hard to tell he was struggling with it.

"Toma? You actually followed me?"

"Of course I did! I'm your personal attendant!"

"So the feeble Chosen has brought his loyal lapdog to accompany him. Flatter your master all you like. Soon he will be nothing to us."

The Priest standing in front of the altar spoke towards Toma with a contemptuous gaze. There wasn't much he could say to Zelos because of his rank, but to a Priest of such low rank such as Toma, he practically had carte blanche. He seemed to continue to assert that Zelos had lost authority in the church, but appeared nonetheless still hesitant to defy the Chosen openly.

"Hah, keep on dreaming!" Zelos interjected. "The Chosen are indispensible to the church and you know it!"

"Is that so? Then why are you leaving Meltokio in such a time of crisis to go off on some sight-seeing jaunt? Is that what someone with the responsibility of a Chosen should do?"

"Well, that's—" Zelos trailed off, pausing to think about it for a bit. "Huh. Y'know, I

guess you actually have a pretty good point."

Seles, dumbfounded at his response, pinched his arm in anger.

"Zelos!"

"Jeez, you just about tore my skin off! Will you ease up a bit?!"

"I will when you manage to get a hold of yourself!" snapped Seles.

"All right, all right!" Zelos gave a dirty look at the Priest as he rubbed his arm, still wincing. "Anyways, I'm not gonna be told that I'm unfit to be a chosen from someone clearly unqualified to be a priest!"

"Hah!" the Priest scowled, turning his nose up at Zelos. "What nonsense!"

"Is it? Then why did you treat that old lady so badly?"

"Oh. Her?"

The Priest looked back to the old woman as if he was looking at a maggot or vermin. The old woman was perturbed by his look, but eventually went down on her knees, and touched her forehead to the floor in a reverent apology.

"My dear Chosen, I thank you for showing me such kindness. But I'm quite alright. I apologize for the inconvenience I've caused everyone. I should have known better, a Sylvaranti like me thinking it would be a wise decision to stop by the cathedral—"

"Ah-ha! So that's what this is all about!"

Zelos quickly approached the old woman. He gently took her hands and helped her get up on her feet.

"I apologize for what they've done to such an elegant damsel as yourself. Please forgive this transgression."

Zelos bowed his head down, and the old woman grew teary-eyed and shook her head.

"Oh, stop. Please, please put your head up!"

"How dare you prostrate yourself before one of those barbaric Sylvaranti! Know your place as the Chosen of Tethe'alla!"

Zelos was about to yell back at him, but Toma was much faster. In a surprising display of action, Toma shrieked loudly and through himself at the Priest, knocking him to the ground and pummeling away at him.

"You're the one who needs to learn his place!"

"What are you doing!?"

The other priests sprang up on top of Toma in an attempt to pry him from the other priest. But no matter how many of them tried, it was like he was stuck fast. Toma certainly didn't look like the type

to put up much of a fight, but in a fight-or-flight situation, it turned out that he was "fight" all the way. Unable to control the situation, the Pope's guards took up their weapons to force their way to him, causing the soldiers from the royal family to charge back at them in response.

Now it was really getting ugly. Zelos buried his head in his hands.

"The hell is the matter with you people?!"

Leaving Seles and the old woman in Tokunaga's care, Zelos ran up to the altar.

"Hey boneheads! This is a church, in case you forgot! Will you get a grip already?!"

"Shut up!"

One of the guards swung down his ax at him. Zelos dodged the attack swiftly, which only succeeded in making the knight even angrier. He started to brandish his axe in a fury.

"Whoa now, relax! You lay a finger on my beautiful face and the Pope will let you have it!"

"Come, Undine!"

A dignified voice of unknown origin echoed throughout the cathedral as a large ball of water formed above the altar and beat down on the clergy. The priests screamed and fell to the floor. Zelos was drenched from head to toe.

"There's only one girl I know who's crazy enough to do that!" grunted Zelos as Sheena Fujibayashi emerged from a curtain of smoke, smirking from ear to ear.

"How about that? Did that help ya cool your head?"

"Ha ha," Zelos retorted dryly. "Still a real comedian, I see."

Zelos looked back at the group in front of the altar who were sitting there soaking wet. They looked too tired to even put up a resistance at this point.

"Well this is just fantastic. Thanks for the unexpected shower, Sheena," griped Zelos, drying off his wet hair with a towel as best he could.

"Are you still whining about that? What was I supposed to do? Besides, what's with the Church of Martel causing such a ruckus?"

Sheena definitely had a point. Zelos heaved a sigh and stretched out his legs a bit. After Undine had arbitrated the quarrel, they all ran off to his mansion. There was no way that a commotion as big as the one that happened would just slip under the radar. The pope would catch wind of it and he and Zelos were always at odds as it was. It was a much better idea to just hightail it out from the church and avoid having to get in an argument with him.

"Welcome home, Master Zelos."

"Sebastian! Is everybody all right?"

Zelos asked his butler who returned to the hall. Sebastian replied in his usual calm way.

"The old woman from Sylvarant has calmed down. The doctor has diagnosed her back problem and says that she'll be able to walk after getting some rest. We've finished treating Toma, Tokunaga, and the soldiers. They're resting in a different room."

"I still just can't believe that Toma would stick his neck out for me like that."

"Right? Kinda makes you wonder why he respects you so much."

"The Priesthood have the utmost respect for the Chosen. It isn't hard to tell why."

Seles glared at Sheena. Sheena instantly realized she shouldn't have said what she did and averted her gaze.

"I guess I was wrong about him," Zelos thought to himself, looking up at the ceiling with a sigh. Before, he had only thought of Toma as being a useless newbie priest who didn't know left from right. But Toma was exceedingly loyal to his duties, and Zelos should have known better than to just dismiss him like that. It was his own fault for being so closed-minded. If he wanted to keep his position in the church, he would have to work with priests like Toma.

At times like this, Zelos would remember the other Chosen and wallow in self-pity.

If only she had been here. She'd know just how to talk to all of them.

"If only I were as good as she was at this sorta stuff," Zelos thought to himself.

Seles sighed to herself, shoulders dropping. "So the rumors were true. The Church of Martel is discriminating against the Sylvaranti," she said, lowering her eyes dolefully. "Why did it come to this?"

"Well, Sylvarant was a world in decline. It's probably hard for them to accept Sylvaranti since our cultures are so different."

"That's all the more reason to bridge the gap between Sylvarant and Tethe'alla."

"True enough, but the Church of Martel in Sylvarant is making things all the more complicated. They've got the same name, but they're both completely different. Different religion, different system. Conflict's kinda unavoidable."

"Why does it have to be like this?" Seles mumbled to herself in frustration.

"Lady Seles, you don't look well."

Sebastian approached her with an expression of concern. Zelos also took a look at Seles and noticed that her face had gone pallid.

Seles had always had poor health. In the past, she was able to maintain her health by using the Exsphere. But now that she had removed it, even the slightest bit of excitement would cause her to fall ill.

"Seles, you should go back to your room and rest."

"But Zelos, you just got here."

"This is not up for debate! Tokunaga's gonna kill me if he hears you fell ill again! Just rest, okay?"

Seles reluctantly stood up after glancing up at Zelos and glowering at Sheena.

"Allow me to assist you." She took Sebastian's helping hand and left the hall plaintively.

"I hope Sebastian'll be all right."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be fine," said Sheena, making a sour face while stressing *"he'll."*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh forget it. I just meant I don't think she's going to take much of a liking to me."

"You mean, Seles? What makes you say that?"

"Are you seriously asking? You really are slow when it comes to understanding her."

"I don't need someone who's slow at everything to tell me that."

"Well, excuse me!"

Zelos shrugged his shoulders and gave a frustrated sigh. He really couldn't tell why Sheena was so mad.

"So anyways, I hear you went on some kind of a trip?" said Sheena after a time.

Zelos paused for a bit and then gave a sly smile.

"Why? Wanna know about all the hunnies I've been hanging with since I last saw you?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm just pointing out that a Chosen shouldn't have left Meltokio at a time like this."

"Hey now, don't be like that. After all, our two worlds finally became one! Why shouldn't I go out there and greet all my babes?"

"And? Did you look for Lloyd at all?"

"Geez, how did you know about that?"

"Don't underestimate Mizuho's information network! And I know for a fact that Lloyd is the only thing you'll put ahead of infighting in the church."

"Yeah, yeah."

Zelos reseated himself on the couch and put both of his hands up in a long, nonchalant stretch.

"Didn't find a thing, though," Zelos said with a deflated sigh.

"You either?"

"Hey, I tried, believe me. I even risked my high standing in the church to go find him! But he didn't leave any hints for me!"

"What do you mean hints for y—"

"Man, this ticks me off! Makes me look like a fool, not being to find that stupid Lloyd!"

"You are a fool, you idiot Chosen!"

Zelos smoothed his wet hair, flipping it with a brush of his hand.

"All jokes aside, isn't it strange? Was he always like this? The type who would just up and disappear without notice or trace?"

"I don't think he is. I hope nothing bad happened to him."

It was clear from her face that Sheena was smitten with Lloyd. And Zelos knew the odds in this match were against him.

Zelos had something of an inferiority complex when it came to Lloyd. But he still had no intention of giving up. Zelos was comfortable with Sheena and keeping on as friends the way they were now, but deep down he knew the day would come in which he'd have to settle things with Lloyd, once and for all.

"So what's up, Sheena? Did you miss me so much you came all the way to Meltokio?"

"Maybe in your wildest dreams! I'm on an errand for His Majesty."

Sheena stood up and was poised to leave when she suddenly stopped in her tracks, realizing that she did indeed forget something important.

"Actually, it's your lucky day. There is something I have to give you."

Sheena took out a small velveteen box.

"Here. It's from Regal."

Zelos took the box in his hand with a puzzled expression on his face and opened it carefully. There was an old amulet tucked away in the box. Zelos took it out and observed it carefully.

"This is an amulet from the Church of Martel. Why did Regal have something like this?"

"Raine gave it to him."

"Raine? Now I'm just more confused," said Zelos, tossing his hair behind his head casually.

"Raine thinks one of the researchers from the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak dropped it. She also said that we could find a list of people who've received an amulet like this by checking the registry at the Church of Martel."

"Oh. Yeah, if this really belongs to someone from Sybak, they should have received if

from the Church of Martel in Tethe'alla."

Zelos winced in a grim expression immediately after saying that.

"Oh crap."

"What?"

"I'd need to talk to the Pope to see the registry at the Church of Martel."

"So why don't you?"

"Are you seriously asking me after you've summoned Undine inside the cathedral and caused a huge mess?"

"Oh, right."

Sheena blushed in embarrassment as she looked back on the fuss she'd caused in the church, staring awkwardly at her feet and coughing shyly.

The pope would have been furious if they were to go back to him now and ask to see the registry after all that happened. No matter how they looked at it, it would take a considerable amount of time to clean up the entire cathedral. The odds that he would forget about the whole thing anytime soon were pretty much nil.

"Great." Zelos looked at the amulet again.

"Aren't these usually the kind that parents give to their kids?"

Looking at it more closely, he noticed the lettering on the amulet.

"Let's see what it says here: 'To my beloved son…?' The rest is too scratched off to read. Where's the ID number?"

Zelos flipped around the amulet to find the engraving. If it wasn't there, there'd be no way for them to check it on the registry.

"Oh, great. This part's rubbed off, too. Let's see—"

Zelos picked up the amulet with his left hand and traced a finger along the left side of it. But as soon as he did so, the amulet cracked and the engraved ID number crumbled away.

"What the—!"

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

Sheena hit Zelos in the head. Zelos looked down and gazed upon the cracked amulet, sighing deeply. Now he'd really done it.

CHAPTER 8

A PRAYER

祈り

The chilling gaze of numerous pairs of judging eyes were upon her.

"You failed to regenerate the world."

Colette Brunel was at loss for words to defend herself from the vitriol that spewed from the crowd in front of her.

And worst of all? She couldn't say they were wrong, either.

After the two worlds fused into one, there were all kinds of problems. Had they been limited to conflicts among the people due to cultural differences, that would have been expected. But with the recent abnormal weather conditions causing chaos and hardship all over the globe, Colette found herself hard pressed to deny that the World Regeneration hadn't been all giggles and roses since it happened.

"I'm sorry." Colette lowered her head sadly. "I—I didn't mean to—"

"Oh you didn't, huh? Then what were you trying to do?" yelled a man in the crowd.

"Wasn't this regeneration supposed to save Sylverant?" yelled one woman.

"Do something about it!" said another.

"I'm sorry! I'm so—"

Colette clutched her throat abruptly. Her voice was gone. Colette tried opening her mouth many times, straining her chest and neck in the process, but it was to no avail. Seeing Colette unable to speak and give a reply to their interrogation only made them angrier.

"You Chosen scumbag!"

"Why do you get to live so well while the rest of the world suffers so?"

"Take some responsibility!"

"Get out! Get out! Get out!" they all began chanting until Colette was overwhelmed. The world seemed to melt away, and she felt faint.

Suddenly, the scenery around her changed. The familiar ceiling of her room came spinning into view as Colette blinked slowly to herself. With a groan and a shudder, she shrugged the memory off as best she could, and dragged her heavy body out of bed.

A dream. Just a dream.

A dream in which she was the target of people's hatred and anger.

But there was more to it than that.

This dream was not a fabrication of the subconscious, but was taken from Colette's memories of events that had actually transpired. All the hurtful words and slings and arrows she'd received from those around her over the years had accumulated inside her, and would turn up in her dreams from time to time.

And even after the Journey of Regeneration, Colette had continued a journey of her own.

It was all for Lloyd. One day, without notice, he had simply up and disappeared on Colette and her friends, and she'd heard nothing from him ever since. She waited patiently for his return at first, believing that there had to be some reason behind his disappearance, but all of her waiting was for naught, as Lloyd never showed himself. She decided then and there she would find Lloyd by herself. She didn't have quite the capacity that organizations like the Lezareno Company or the Mizuho Villagers did, but Colette had her own information network of priests in the Church of Martel. No matter how trivial it may have been, she was certain that they could find at least some clue to Lloyd's whereabouts if they searched around the small villages and the surroundings of the House of Salvation. She left on her journey with high hopes, but her search had come up fruitless insofar.

Nevertheless, Colette continued on her journey to find answers. She had witnessed many people who suffered from the adverse effects of the regenerated world on her travels. And those people used her as an outlet for their rage. Colette could do naught but accept their blame and harsh criticism.

Colette didn't actually believe that all the abnormal phenomena that was going on was solely her own fault, of course. But that also didn't mean that she felt no guilt or pity for the events that caused so much suffering. In her mind, this was a sort of penance for her transgressions.

She did decline to become a vessel for Martel and delayed the World Regeneration as a result. The Giant Tree's rampage had scarred the land all over. These were facts that could not be ignored. And she strove now to do all she could to make up for it, feeble though she may have been.

Colette took a deep breath and tried to slow her pounding heart.

Relieved it was all a dream, this time, she cautiously put her hands to her throat and checked to see if her vocal cords were still functioning properly. Thankfully, they were.

During the Journey of Regeneration, Colette had lost her voice before. She stopped sleeping and eventually lost her ability to even dream. In those days, even nightmares would have been a blessing to her. It had been hard for her, but she felt blessed to take part in the journey.

In any case, Colette was alive. She could live on as she pleased. And that was all she needed for a sense of personal happiness.

Checking her surroundings, Colette couldn't help but notice how tidy her room was. Her grandmother had kept it spotless and neat in her stead, so it would always feel like home when she came back. Colette took some small solace in knowing that the everyday life she had longed and even fought for was still present in this very room.

The sunlight which streamed from her window seemed to be brighter than usual, and Colette realized she might have overslept. Quickly shifting gears emotionally as best as she could, she got out of bed and stretched for a while.

After getting dressed, Colette carefully eased down the stairs. Even when she was a little girl, she'd often lost her footing on these steps. As she slowly walked downstairs, balancing herself with her arms to the sides and staring at her feet, she caught a whiff of what smelled like hot soup from the kitchen.

Her father, Frank Brunel, was reading a book at the table when he noticed Colette and looked up.

"Good morning, Colette."

"Good morning, father. Mmm, it smells really good."

"Your grandmother is making some vegetable soup for you right now. Wash your face and then you can eat."

"Okay."

Colette headed over to the sink and washed her face, then brushed her teeth and fixed her hair. This was how she liked things: nothing out of the ordinary and no surprises. She took comfort in the banality of everyday life. Calm and peaceful. There would be nothing more she could ask for, other than to have Lloyd by her side.

"Is anything wrong?"

Frank looked back at her. Colette forced out a smile as she shook her head sideways.

"Oh, it's nothing. Really I'm just ready for some soup! Father, would you like some too? Did you already finish your breakfast?"

"Yeah, I already had my meal."

Colette nodded and walked towards the kitchen and opened the soup pot. She prepared the dining table with her grandmother's signature dish in one hand and sat in front of Frank.

"It's been ages since I've had grandmother's cooking! I can't wait!"

Colette came back to her hometown, Iselia, late last night. For a while, Colette searched for Lloyd with Izoold as her base, but came back to Iselia after her search there came up empty-handed.

"Did you find any clues of where Lloyd might be?"

Colette sighed deeply and her shoulders sank. She dropped her spoon beside her soup bowl, emitting an audible tinkling sound of metal against porcelain.

"Not yet."

"I see."

An awkward silence fell between them.

Frank was worried about Lloyd as well. He was very thankful that he had accompanied Colette on the Journey of Regeneration.

"Don't take it so hard, Colette."

Frank furrowed his brows with a tone of concern. Colette replied with a smile.

"I'll be alright. And I won't give up!"

Colette stood up as she finished her sentence and left the table, her soup giving off the last of its steam. It hurt her to see her father worrying so.

"Colette?"

"I'm going to go out get some fresh air. I also want to check on the village."

Colette motioned to clean up the dishes but Frank stopped her.

"Don't worry. I'll do it for you."

Frank probably knew what was going on, and could tell that Colette was about to run out of the house so she wouldn't have to explain her feelings. Colette left the cleaning up to Frank and hurried out of her house.

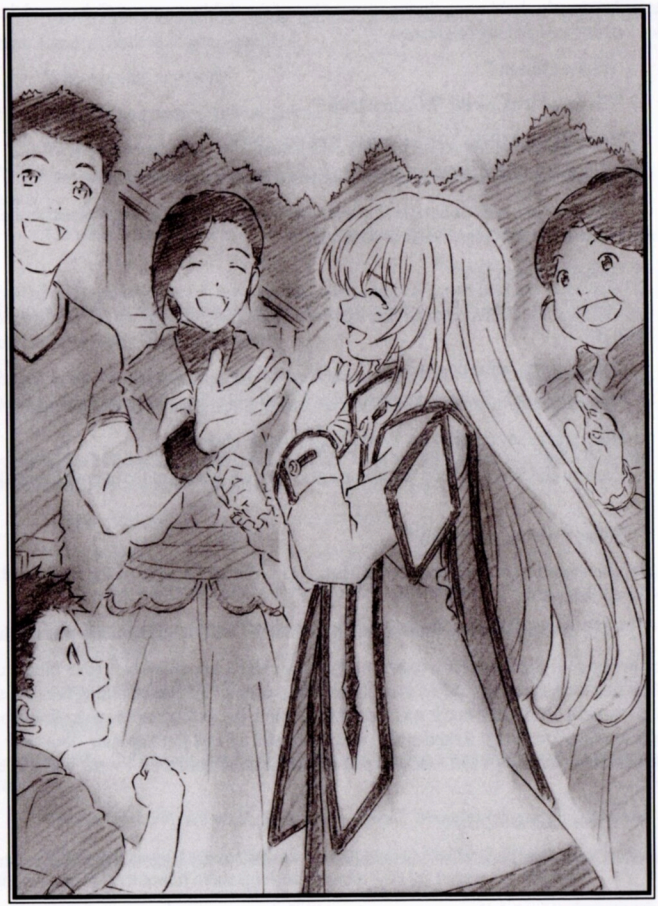
It had been a month since Colette's last visit to the village, but it was calm and peaceful as ever, albeit more humid than usual. The temperature itself wasn't terribly high, but she was sweating profusely. The World Regeneration had caused drastic changes in the environment, and Iselia was no exception. Whether the humidity in Iselia was on account of the changes in terrain, or if it marked the start of abnormal weather conditions, Colette did not know, but something was not right.

As she walked towards the school, some of the farmers took notice and bowed to her reverently.

"Welcome back, Chosen."

"Y—Yes. I've returned."

Even pleasantries and small talk of this nature made Colette happy. All the people in Iselia treated



her with kindness, and she felt fortunate to have their support and trust.

When she reached the school grounds, she found some children playing ball outside their classrooms. Apparently she'd come during recess. One of the children noticed Colette and the expression on his face instantly brightened.

"It's the Chosen!"

"Oh wow! It's Colette! Welcome back!"

"Hey! That's MISS Colette to you!" spat one child.

The children greeted her with vibrant smiles and crowded around her in a circle.

"Oh, just plain old 'Colette' is fine with me!" said Colette, flashing a placid smile. She gently patted each of the children's heads around her.

"Is it your recess time?"

"Yeah," one of the children answered as he pumped a fist in the air enthusiastically. "We're gonna play!"

"Hey Colette, come play with us!"

"She can't play with us, DUH! She's a Chosen! She's gotta be like, super busy!"

"But didn't she complete the World Regeneration already?"

The crowd of rowdy children suddenly fell silent and looked up, gazing at Colette with doe-like eyes.

"What's wrong, everybody?"

The children exchanged looks with each other. Then, a kid who appeared to be the leader of the group spoke up sheepishly.

"Um, Colette? Is it true what people say? That the World Regeneration was a failure?"

Colette bit her lip softly, at a loss for words to reply to the child's innocuous but rather blunt question. It wasn't the first time she'd been asked that, either. When people first started asking her that, she was able to say with confidence that it was indeed successful, but as time went on she found herself unsure how to reply. The World Regeneration was successful, of that she was sure—but were the chaos and abnormal conditions that followed part of that success? And if they were, was it even worth it?

"It was successful, right?"

The children looked at her hopefully. Colette didn't know what to say back to them and caught her breath.

"Whoa there, tykes—why are you asking her such an obvious question?"

A cheerful sounding voice suddenly resonated throughout the schoolyard. When she looked up,

Colette saw one of her comrades, Zelos, standing in front of them. Colette stared at him wide-eyed and bewildered at his sudden appearance.

"Take it from me, the World Regeneration was successful. So don't worry your tiny heads about it and go back to playing, alright?"

"Who are you, anyway?"

One of the children looked suspiciously at Zelos.

"Were you born yesterday?" said Zelos, shaking his head and waving his hair in the wind. "You don't know of the radiantly beautiful Zelos, the greatest Chosen of them all? Get with the program!"

"Oh yeah, I heard of Zelos," spoke one of the children. "He was one of Colette's escorts, right?"

Zelos snorted and crossed his arms, an unamused smile appearing on his face. "Oh yeah? One of her 'escorts', huh? I'll let that slide, kid. Anyways, you kids go over there and play. I have some important business with Colette right now."

Zelos shooed away the children, waving his hand dismissively. But Colette thought nothing of it. One look in his eyes said it all: she knew that, despite his tough exterior, Zelos cared greatly for them.

After watching the kids run off to play, Zelos looked back at Colette and laughed a little, nodding at her. Colette nodded back and smiled widely.

"Thanks, Zelos."

"For what?"

"For saying what you did about the World Regeneration."

"Oh, that? Ain't anything that deserves your thanks," said Zelos, as he smiled and pat Colette gently on the head.

"You did good, Colette."

"Thanks."

After meeting Zelos, Colette felt like the thorn that was digging into her heart had been removed completely.

"By the way, why are you here in Iselia, Zelos? Weren't you going back to Meltokio?"

"Well, there was some—shall we say, 'drama' in Meltokio, actually," said Zelos, as he sheepishly averted his gaze and made quotation marks with his fingers on "drama."

A while back, Zelos and Colette journeyed together. Zelos contacted Colette one day out of frustration with the lack of progress in his own search for Lloyd. When he found out that Colette was also looking for him, they decided to combine their efforts and work together to find Lloyd.

"How about you, Colette? Did you find anything about Lloyd at Izoold?"

"No. It was the same as anywhere else. No one's seen even a trace of him."

"Where could he have gone to? He's not lost or something, is he? Like, maybe he forgot how to get home? Thought he was smarter than that, but I guess that's our Lloyd!"

"Ha-ha."

Colette often blamed herself for being unable to find Lloyd, but whenever she would talk to Zelos, she felt better knowing that she wasn't alone in her struggle. Maybe it was his gallantry and frank nature that put her mind at ease—or simply that his pig-headedness made her laugh and feel more comfortable. But in any case, she was grateful to have Zelos as a friend.

"You can't fool me, I saw you crack a smile! And that's just what I want to see on your lovely face."

Colette blushed and slightly rolled her eyes at Zelos. He was still a ladykiller, that much hadn't changed. "Thanks, Zelos. But didn't you have something you wanted to ask me?"

"Oh, yeah."

Zelos turned back and called over to a young man who was standing behind a tree. He trotted over next to Zelos and bowed reverently.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Almaton."

"He's one of the researchers the Imperial Research Academy in Sybak."

After Zelos's introduction, Colette bowed towards Almaton.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Colette Brunel."

"I'm so honored to meet the Chosen!"

Almaton said as his cheeks flushed. Zelos chuckled arrogantly to himself and smiled broadly. "Yeah, I guess it IS kind of a big deal!" he said. Modest as ever.

"Almaton, why are you here in Iselia?"

"Well you see, a friend of mine lost his amulet when he was investigating the ruins. I had been searching for it for some time and eventually heard that it had fallen into Master Zelos' hands."

"Uh—yeah," said Zelos sheepishly, scuffing at the ground to avoid eye contact. "About that amulet…"

Zelos held out the amulet towards Colette. Colette took it in her hands and looked at it carefully.

"Huh? This looks broken."

"Yeah—that's my bad."

"Are you serious?"

"Hey now, it wasn't on purpose! I was trying to read it and see who the owner was and it just kinda broke. Come on, you believe me, don't ya Colette?"

"Of course I do. But what can we even do about it? I have no idea how to fix this, and besides, shouldn't we return it to Martel and ask her to purify it?"

"Well, I guess so. But I just thought that it'd be better if we gave it back to the owner since it's clearly pretty important. Though actually I was thinking about just getting him a new one as an apology," said Zelos, putting his hands together in reverence.

"Think we could maybe handle the bestowing at your place, Colette?"

"I suppose, but why can't you just take care of it?"

"Well, uh—things at the church are a little hectic right now."

"Oh? Did something happen between you guys?"

Zelos flushed and scratched his head shyly. "Yeah, you could say that. Anyways, I'm not really in a position to ask for favors right now. Please, Colette? Pretty please?"

"Okay. My grandmother should be able to prepare for it if I ask her. I think she's at the Mayor's house now, so I'll ask her later."

"Thank you so much, Lady Colette!" said Almaton, relieved. "I'll be waiting at the inn."

"Excellent! I'll come by later," said Colette, cheerful as ever.

Almaton bowed and walked away towards the center of the village where the inn was located. After seeing him off, Colette looked back at Zelos and gazed into his eyes.

"Was that your errand, Zelos? Was that all?"

"Yeah, for now."

"Then do you have some time? If you're free, there's somewhere I want to take you."

Zelos blinked and lost his breath for a second, taken aback by Colette's sudden invitation. Could it be? Had Colette finally decided to put the moves on him?

"Yeah, I'm free. But for a lady like you, even if I didn't have time, you can bet I'd make some."

"Then could you follow me for a bit?" Colette took Zelos's arm and started walking to the north.

"Colette, isn't the temple this way?"

"Yup! I wanted you to accompany me in giving a prayer."

"You mean you need a bodyguard because the temple is dangerous?"

"No, it's not that."

"What is this all about, then?"

Zelos was puzzled. Colette put her index finger on her lips and smiled.

"It's a secret."

The Martel Temple, located to the northwest of Iselia, was the foremost temple of Sylvarant. It used to be the place where the oracle for the World Regeneration was bestowed. Though it was usually a place for prayer, the release of monsters by Cruxis made it a notoriously dangerous area nowadays.

Colette headed up to the top floor with Zelos in tow. Both of them were used to battle, and so the monsters here posed little to no threat to them. They made it to the top floor without incident. Having reached the altar, Colette stood in front of it, clasped her hands together, and closed her eyes.

And, silently, with her thoughts in her heart, she would speak to God.

Thank you for emancipating us from suffering.

Thank you for washing away the pain we've accrued in our lives.

Thank you for bestowing peace upon us.

Thank you for giving us the courage to stand up and fight.

And…

"What are you praying for, Colette?"

Colette slowly looked up in response to Zelos' question.

"I'm saying thank you."

"For what?"

"For bringing you to Iselia."

Colette turned back at him and smiled. Zelos stood there dumbfounded. As arrogant as he may have seemed on the surface, he wasn't really expecting a compliment like that from Colette.

"What do you mean?"

"I think I was a bit tired. I had nightmares and had lost sight of the people that loved and cared for me."

"Colette, I—"

"But after I met you again," said Colette, unyielding to Zelos' interjection, "I felt a lot better. I realized that I was pushing myself too hard. So I wanted to pray and give thanks for everything. I'm sorry to have brought you out here just for this."

"Spoken like a true Chosen!" chuckled Zelos.

"I'm not the only one!" said Colette with a bright smile.

"True enough, but the difference is I'm a Chosen in name only. I'm not really fit to be one, and I know it," Zelos murmured self-deprecatingly as he looked outside. "I'd just rant and complain about stuff and wouldn't even think about thanking anyone."

"That's not true!" Colette flashed a stern look at Zelos. "You're the same as I am!"

"The same? How so?"

Colette smiled and put a hand on Zelos' shoulder reassuringly. "We both have the same pain and responsibilities. And we feel the same obligation to carry the burden all by ourselves as if that will solve everything."

After saying that, Colette felt like she'd said too much and held up her hands in abandonment.

"Oh, I didn't mean to sound judgmental. I'm sorry if that was out of line!"

After looking at Collete for a while, Zelos muttered, "It's fine, really." In his typical fashion, he was calm and collected.

"Come to think of it, this was the place where we met the Spirit of Heart. I suppose we definitely picked a good place to pray."

Zelos nodded resolutely and turned back to face Colette, adjusting his posture.

"Colette, could you say a prayer for me, too?"

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"You still have that broken amulet, right?"

Colette nodded and took out the amulet from her pocket.

"Can you purify that amulet with your prayers? Like, how you purify it by returning it to Martel? I never paid too much attention to the ceremonies or whatever, but I think all that happens is the priest prays for it. If that's true, then wouldn't a Chosen be all the more fit to handle it? Wouldn't that get the job done?"

Zelos lowered his eyes in embarrassment. Colette could tell he probably still felt guilty for breaking the amulet.

Just as Zelos said, this was the place where they met the Spirit of Heart. Corrine, the artificial spirit who was Sheena's best friend, lost its life here and reincarnated as that spirit, and in the same place was eventually reunited with Sheena. Perhaps they could meet that same spirit here again. And if so, then surely the Spirit of Heart would hear their prayer and carry it to the owner of the amulet.

"Alright, we'll pray. But I want you to pray with me."

"Me? No thanks. I'm not really fit for this sort of thing—and plus I broke the amulet anyways."

"Oh come on, let's pray together!"

Colette put the amulet in her left hand and held it out to Zelos, who sighed and put his right hand on top of it with a resigned look on his face. And so, the two closed their eyes, hearts as one, and prayed.

God, bless the owner of this amulet.

So they can be loved forevermore.

So they may finally know peace.

In the distance, the two heard a tiny sound like a bell ringing, singing out in concert with their prayer.

CHAPTER 9

THE STIRRING

胎動の刻

The city of Palmacosta had been rebuilt at last.

During the time when the entire city was destroyed by the Giant Kharlan Tree, Palmacosta was a reflection of death itself, a derelict littered with corpses and rubble. But after the landscape was finally rebuilt after a time, Palmacosta was back to its old self, revived as the world's largest port city. And the people of Palmacosta were proud of their new city as a symbol of revival and renewed hope.

But even in a city like this one, with such hope for the future, there was a sense of restlessness that hung in the air.

The reason? The appearance of the other world, Tethe'alla, which had fused together with Sylvarant after the World Regeneration.

There was a huge rift between Tethe'alla and Sylvarant due to all the differences in culture, science, and technology. Tethe'alla was very clearly more advanced than Sylvarant, and this disparity was the main focus between the two, having brought about all kinds of disputes and discrimination between the two worlds.

The incident witnessed by Marta Lauldi was just one such example.

"Move out of my way!"

Suddenly Marta heard an angry voice behind her. Taken by surprise, her heart raced, and she looked back towards the source of it.

At the entrance of the city, a stout man seemed to be ranting and raving. In front of him was a boy

who had collapsed on the ground and was clutching a wine bottle. He was probably around ten years old.

"What's going on here?"

The middle-aged women standing next to her asked a question in a frightening manner. Marta shook her head.

"Where'd you think you were going, huh? My clothes are all ruined with that wine!"

"I—I'm so sorry! I was so focused on not breaking the wine bottle that I—"

"You call that an apology?! These damn Sylvaranti don't even have the most basic etiquette, I swear!"

As the angry man raised his voice, the boy hurriedly stood up and lowered his head in reverence.

"I'm really sorry!"

"Standing on two legs like a Human Being, huh? You got some nerve! Get on your knees like the dog that you are and beg my forgiveness, you twit!"

Marta was flabbergasted at the man's behavior and tone he was taking with such a young boy over something so trivial. She clenched her fist so tight that her nails dug into her skin.

Judging from the man's clothes and manner of speaking, he was probably a Tethe'allan. Most of the trouble in the city came from Tethe'allans who were treating the Sylvaranti like dirt. Marta waited to see if anyone out there would intervene, but not one among the crowd stirred. Perhaps they were just afraid of the man or else didn't want to get involved.

The boy grit his teeth, shivering with fear and rage, and then got down on his knees as the man had asked him to, eyes unblinking.

"Stuck up little snot." The man towered above the boy and spat at him. Marta found herself unable to control her temper any longer and took a stand in front of the man.

"Hey, what's the big idea?"

The man snorted. "Well well, looks like we've got another little snot here! One who's not worthy to be wiped on my sleeve."

"I don't mind telling you I don't like your tone, sir."

"Oh yeah? You gonna do something about it?"

"You're darn right I am! Maybe the kid wasn't looking where he was going, but that doesn't warrant this kind of treatment! Now man up and apologize to him!"

"You don't think so, huh? My clothes are ruined because of this brat! And ain't no way a dirt poor Sylvaranti like him got the money to pay me back. If he knew how to give a proper apology, I'd be willing to forgive him, but he can't even do that much. So really, I'm doing him a favor by teaching him a badly needed lesson in etiquette. Now back off and mind your own

business?"

"The only thing you're teaching him is how to be a moron! You're just taking your aggression out on him, and everyone knows it!"

"Enough of your lip! Time for you to go for a ride!"

The man grabbed Marta by the collar and threw her onto the stone pavement like he was throwing away garbage. She nearly fainted from the force of the blow.

"Ouch!"

Marta rubbed her forehead as she slowly stood up. She felt something warm and wet cascade from her forehead to her cheeks each time she moved. Without even looking, she knew it was probably cracked open somewhere.

"You idiot! Don't you know that a girls' face is more important than her life?! You're gonna pay!"

Marta was about to slug the guy in the face when she felt someone grab her shoulders from behind.

"Huh?"

Marta turned around to find a man with glasses right behind her.

"Don't move. Stay here."

The man was down on his knees when she looked sharply at him. Sensing some power beyond her comprehension, Marta nodded clumsily. The man stood up and approached the rowdy Tethe'allan. Then without so much as a word or forewarning, he threw a punch that was lightning-fast and knocked the man down instantly. As Marta and the onlookers were taken aback, the man with the glasses continued to hit him several times in the face—making audible crashing sounds as each blow landed—and then kicked him in the chin after he fell on the ground. The man fell down senseless without uttering a word. It all happened in the blink of an eye, and the crowd was so taken aback by it all that the entire group just stood there, mouths wide open in shock, as the venue fell silent.

After a long pause, the man spoke up.

"Hey, someone get over here."

The man with glasses took a look around and caught the young man standing nearest to him. He gulped and walked forward slowly, cautiously.

"Take this bozo over to the police or something."

"Huh?"

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

Shot with an intense glare, the young man gave a shudder and nodded. Then the man with glasses turned toward the boy with the wine bottle and asked him if he was hurt, his tone of voice suggested no particular concern. The boy shook his head and instead ran over to Marta, gesturing at her injured

head.

"Quite a deep scar."

The man with glasses got down on his knees and used a healing arte on Marta's forehead. For a brief moment, her entire forehead felt feverish but the pain soon went away.

"Th—thank you very much."

The man stood up without replying to Marta's gratitude and walked off towards the inside of the city as if nothing happened. As soon as the man left, the crowd started to buzz and time started moving again. Marta stood up hurriedly and ran up to the boy who started this chain of events.

"Hey, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

The boy gathered up all of the wine bottles and nodded gratefully.

"Oh, no, no. I didn't do anything. But hey, by the way: was that man with glasses a friend of yours?"

"N—No. I've never seen him before."

"I see."

Marta looked back in the direction that the man with the glasses had run off to. He was probably heading for the port. If she left now, she might be able to catch up with him. All she wanted to know was his name so she could thank him later. She sifted through the crowd and took off in a sprint.

By the time Marta passed the Governor-General's office and reached the port, the man was already at the dock. Marta was about to call out to him when suddenly another man approached him.

"I finally found you, Richter."

The man, who appeared to be wearing some sort of uniform, let out a relieved sigh. Apparently Richter was the man in glasses' name. The man in the uniform produced a small velvet lined box from his pocket and presented it to Richter.

"This is the amulet Aster was looking for. There were a few snags on the road to getting it here so part of it is broken, but I've prepared a new one."

After a time and some explanation, the man noticed Marta eavesdropping on their conversation and tried to subtly shuffle away. But just when he was about to leave, Marta heard Richter yell out fiercely.

"He's dead already!"

The man was taken aback by Richter's sudden rage. "Richter? What are you saying?"

"Just keep the damn thing. Get lost."

Richter pushed the box back to the man with the uniform. But he pushed it back towards Richter

again and shook his head insistently.

"What do you mean he's dead? Tell me what's going on."

"I killed him! I—I killed him!"

Richter shouted in frustration, pushed away the man, and started running towards Marta. Marta quickly stepped aside to make way for him, and Richter disappeared into the crowd and out of sight.

There was a warehouse that had been converted into a residency at the eastern edge of Palmacosta. A group known as The Vanguard had been using it as their base, which had drawn the attention of the vigilante army of Palmacosta.

This base was also Marta's home.

Marta once lived peacefully in a modest household with her father and mother. But with the destruction of Palmacosta, that happiness she knew came to a crashing end. Her mother was killed, and her father never recovered from the emotional shock, which changed him almost completely. Eventually, her father established the Vanguard, who sought to fight oppression from the Tethe'allans, and were now notorious the world over.

But the Vanguard wasn't really a dangerous group of people. Or at least, it didn't used to be.

Their original purpose was to simply protect the Sylvaranti from the discrimination they were facing from the Tethe'allans. But now they had gained notoriety as being primarily a terrorist organization, which worried Marta.

"Father would never do something like that," Marta tried to tell herself. "I'm just imagining things, is all."

Holding those thoughts in her heart, Marta entered the Vanguard base.

"Welcome home, Lady Marta!" The gate guard saluted her.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Did something happen, Lady Marta?"

"Hmm?"

"You're injured! Just look at your arm and leg."

Marta checked where the man had pointed out. Sure enough, they were probably injuries she got from when that angry Tethe'allan man had thrown her over his shoulder. She was so concerned with the head injury she received that she didn't notice there were more. The injuries themselves weren't really a big deal, just some scrapes and scratches here and there. But if her father were to find out about this, there would be a huge fiasco.

"Keep this a secret from my dad, all right?" said Marta in a low voice.

"But—"

"I promise you I'm fine. I just tripped is all. So don't worry him with things that he doesn't need to know anyways, got it?"

After making sure that the guard understood her, Marta sprinted off through the empty hallway.

Marta's father, Brute, was known for being far too overprotective of his daughter. If he were to discover that she got hurt, Marta knew he wouldn't take the news lightly. And if he heard that she'd gotten into a fight with a Tethe'allan, he'd probably ground Marta so long that she'd never see the light of day again.

Carefully checking her surroundings, Marta headed for her room on the top floor of the base, flustered at herself all the while.

"Dang it, now I've really messed up! I should have asked that guy Richter to heal me completely."

Realizing that this mindset wasn't going to do her any good at this point, she shrugged it off as best she could.

"It's really my own stupid fault." She thought to herself. "I got injured in the first place because I acted without even thinking about what I was doing. Stupid, stupid, stu—"

Just then, the door behind her flung open and Vanguard soldiers filed into the hallway. It looked like they were in some meeting that had just been adjourned. The moment she thought that, she heard a singsong voice call out to her in the hall.

"Oh, is that you, Martmart?"

Marta heaved a big sigh in response to hearing her abhorrent pet name and leaned against the nearest wall.

"Alice. So good to see you," said Marta flatly, staring in disgust back at Alice.

"Well, that's no way to greet someone! You know how it hurts me when you talk like that," said Alice, in a tone that was entirely too perky as she trotted towards Marta, pushing through the soldiers. Her white dress appeared to bounce with her every time she moved. Her face and clothing made her look cloyingly adorable, and the way she tilted her head when she spoke or smiled made her appear like a living doll. But Marta knew she couldn't let her looks deceive her: Alice was top brass at the base and the leader of the fighting squad.

"Hey Alice, wait up for me!"

A tall man came running in a huff up to Alice. His name was Decus. He was also top brass here and was practically Alice's personal barnacle, always clinging to her, always following her around. Sadly for him, his affection was unrequited. He would have come across as a creepy stalker-type if not for the fact that Alice treated him like dirt, making him look chivalrous, kind, and loyal in the face of the oppression he received from her. And relations with Alice aside, he was a kind hearted man, if nothing else.

"Eww! Get away from me, Dumbo Decus!"

Alice shoved him away with her horse-riding whip and then bat her eyes at Marta as if something had caught her attention.

"What are you staring at me for? What do you—"

Marta tensed up as Alice outstretched a hand to her and then traced along the injury on Marta's arms with her perfectly trimmed nails.

"Ouch! Hey, what do you think you're doing?!"

"Oh, Martmart. I had no idea you were wounded so! Are you okay? I'm ever so worried about you," said Alice in a voice so singsong it was actually more scary than cute.

"Yeah, I bet you are."

"As a matter of fact, I'm so worried that I think I'll inform Commander Brute about this. He should know that his precious Martmart has been hurt!"

"Now hang on just a minute! There's no reason to tell my dad about this!"

"Nonsense! Of course there is! Why, you're the apple of his eye! And it's my duty to inform him about what's going on with you down to the very last detail. Or don't you remember?"

"I'm perfectly fine, I'm telling you!"

"Calm yourself, Marta," Decus interjected. "Surely you know that the Commander would be far more worried if you were to keep hiding things from him, would he not? You should accept Alice's kind offer."

Decus' carefree tone suggested that he had no clue about the severity of the situation Marta was in. If Alice told on her, she'd be in big trouble for sure.

"Just leave me alone!"

"No can do, Martmart. It's wrong to hide things from your parents," said Alice, flicking Marta's forehead.

"Ouch! I told you, that hurts!"

"See! You're injured! You should go report to your daddy and get treated, okay?"

Alice smiled like an angel and turned away on her heels."

"Let's get going, Decus."

As Alice started walking away, the soldiers standing around them ran to the side of the hallway in a fright and cleared the way for her. Alice disappeared down the hall humming and whipping at the soldiers gleefully.

"Wait, Alice! Dang it, she keeps ignoring me. This stupid love ring doesn't even work!"

Decus shouted in annoyance and took off the pyramid-shaped ring made out of obsidian from his pinky finger and threw it on the ground. He was the type that bought into superstitions easily and

plus was a total shopaholic to boot, so Marta was hardly surprised to see that he'd wasted money on something so trivial.

"I knew it," said Decus, "I knew I should have bought that 'Eau de Seduction' cologne! I've heard that it's guaranteed to make anyone popular with the ladies! Do you think it works, Marta?"

Taken by surprise by his question, Marta nodded reflexively, not even thinking about what she'd been asked.

"I knew it!" said Decus, delighted by her response as he ran after Alice with a spring in his step.

Marta was undaunted. It didn't matter what Decus knew. It was Alice who was the big problem. Marta pinched her temples and groaned to herself. She was done for. There was no doubt that Alice would tell her father about what happened.

"That woman is such a psycho, I swear!" said Marta to herself. "Nothing good ever comes from her being around."

And sure enough, that same night, Marta was summoned by her father, Brute.

When Marta entered the room, Brute was already sitting at a desk, staring back at her sternly with unblinking eyes.

"You know why I called you here." It wasn't a question. Marta nodded softly.

"Tell me why you're injured."

Marta glanced back up and looked up at Brute from her downcast gaze. She expected him to be flying into a rage at this point but he seemed somehow more relaxed than usual. Maybe it'd actually be okay if she told him. She gulped, took a deep breath, and turned to face her father.

"I bumped into a boy who was carrying wine near the entrance to the city and fell down."

"Is that true?"

Brute's response was almost immediate. Startled, Marta nodded and tried to play it cool. In the next moment though, Brute put both his elbows on top of his desk, wrapped his arms over his head, and sighed deeply.

"Why are you lying to your daddy like this?"

"Huh?"

"I heard from Alice that you got into a fight with a Tethe'allan."

"What?!"

Marta raised her voice without even thinking.

Alice, psychopath that she was, had certainly done her homework if she knew all the details already. The whole event had caused quite a scene, so she probably just asked around town to get what she needed to know. Still, the fact that she went to such lengths to harass her like this was sick, even for her.

"That dirty little tramp!" thought Marta to herself. But on the surface, she remained composed and instead nodded to her father.

"I'm sorry, daddy. I didn't mean to lie to you. But—"

"I understand, Marta." Brute shook his head, a look of fatigue in his eyes. "You couldn't ignore what that Tethe'allan was doing to that boy, could you?"

"Right."

"I don't blame you for how you feel. But you're a girl. You shouldn't stick your neck out in such dangerous situations like that."

"But even Alice would have—"

"Alice is much more mature than you. She has the means to fight and can protect herself. You're still just a child, Marta."

"Daddy, I—"

"I can't believe that a filthy Tethe'allan would try to bring a child like you down by force!" said Brute, banging the desk in anger.

"Daddy, will you get off it?! It's over and done with!"

"We cannot allow these barbarians to do as they please. They need to learn that any acts of aggression will be returned to them in full force. Otherwise they'll start to think they own this town!"

Brute's voice got gradually deeper as he ranted and raved about the Tethe'allans, his teeth and fists slowly clenching. Marta was terrified at Brute's display of anger. There was no telling what he'd be capable of when truly enraged.

"Daddy, please, don't do anything reckless. People are starting to say that the Vanguard is acting too rashly lately. We have to show them that isn't true! The Vanguard exists to protect everyone in Sylvarant, right? How can we accomplish that in an all-out war with the Tethe'allans?"

Brute fell silent and bit his tongue as Marta pressed him for an answer.

The rumors that the Vanguard were trying to trigger a war between Sylvarant and Tethe'alla had been flying around for some time already. Marta knew her father would never plan something so insane, but with more and more fanatics joining the ranks of the Vanguard these days, she couldn't help but worry.

"Daddy!"

"Marta, it's all right."

Brute stood up from his chair and walked over to Marta, giving her a gentle hug.

"I am most definitely resentful towards the Tethe'allans. But please, trust me: I have no intention of doing anything so rash."

"I believe you, daddy."

"I know. You're grounded for a while." His tone had changed instantly.

"What?!"

Marta puffed her cheeks and tore herself from her father's side, bewildered expression on her face.

"Why?!"

"There might be more uncivilized Tethe'allans out there like that one barbarian, and you might get hurt."

"I'm okay! I promise I won't do anything dangerous."

"You're not getting out of this one, young lady."

Brute looked sharply at Marta and then flicked her forehead with his finger. Marta pouted and rubbed her forehead.

Just then, they heard a knock on the office door. Brute granted admission to enter and a messenger came in, telling Brute that there was a visitor here for him.

"A visitor at this time of the day?"

Brute looked out the window in surprise. It had grown dark. The sun had gone down long ago and it was black as ink outside.

"A man named Richter Abent is claiming that he has an appointment with the Commander, sir!"

Marta gasped at the mention of the visitor. She remembered the young man with glasses whose name was also Richter. The name wasn't terribly uncommon so it could have been someone else. But if it were the same man, what on earth would he want with her father?

"Ah, Richter! So good of you to come today!"

At the mention of his name, Brute smiled broadly and welcomed the visitor in. He must have been important.

"Excuse me."

A familiar voice echoed through the room, and a young man entered. Marta took a casual look at his face and noticed that it was indeed the same man who helped her earlier that day. Her jaw went agape and she found herself murmuring his name out loud.

Richter must have overheard her, for he gazed right back at her. He recognized Marta immediately and his eyes widened in surprise. Marta wondered if she should just thank Richter openly for helping her earlier, but Richter's expression went back to its usual stone cold gaze and he ignored Marta entirely. Looks like he didn't want her talking to him.

"I've been waiting for you, Richter."

While Brute and Richter exchanged handshakes, Marta saw a bracelet like object that appeared to be made from a broken amulet on Richter's wrist. Marta believed it had to have held some sort of special meaning for him, since Richter didn't seem like the type to accessorize or be particularly concerned about his appearance.

"The preparations are complete. I've narrowed down the places that Tenebrae could be."

"Understood. Then we'll be meeting soon, correct?"

"Indeed."

Marta blinked and stared in bewilderment. "Wait a minute, is Rich—I mean, is this man joining the Vanguard?"

Brute smiled placidly to Marta's question.

"Yes, from today onward. I'd asked him personally to do some investigation on my behalf before off the record, but from now on Richter is officially one of us."

Marta did her best to stifle her shock, but her eyes widened and she let out a faint gasp. She had reason to be worried. She had seen this man before with her own eyes, mercilessly wailing on that Tethe'allan, and even saw him admit in a rage to having killed someone before. What would it mean for the Vanguard if someone like him joined their ranks?

Her fears may have been unfounded. Brute did promise that he wouldn't do anything rash.

But Marta still found herself trembling, unable to quell the anxiety that ate away at her heart by the second.

EPILOGUE

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The landscape appeared covered in a blanket of green. Lloyd found himself breaking into a broad grin in response to the nostalgic and calming scent of the great forest.

"It's been a while."

Noishe made a purring sound in reply to Lloyd's soft voice.

"Hey now, why so sad? Didn't you notice what's been going on lately?"

Lloyd peered over Noishe's face. Noishe licked the tip of Lloyd's nose and barked as if to say that of course he had.

With the world finally regenerated at last, things were back to their original state. Finally, Tethe'alla and Sylvarant had been released from their vicious cycle of exploiting each other for sustenance.

But that the world's crisis hadn't ended just yet.

Humans, Elves, and Half-elves now shared the world together. The chasm between their differences would not be crossed easily, and Tethe'allans and Sylvaranti still fought endlessly with each other. Now that the two worlds had fused into one, the map had changed, and these geographical changes also drastically changed the climate.

But these changes in of themselves were not threats. They were simply a part of this new world that people would have to adapt themselves to from now on, as with any change that happened.

However, these changes would serve as the prelude of the true chaos that was to come.

It appeared at a first glance that the abnormal weather conditions and the increase in monsters arose

from side effects of the World Regeneration. But unbeknownst to most people, the real reason for these changes lied in the retention of Mana flow.

By its nature, Mana did not even exist in this world. Even when the Elves had brought in the giant tree that produced Mana, it did not spread efficiently. In order to control the flow of Mana, the spirit that dwelled in the tree released monsters. But that tree had since withered away, and a new tree flourished in this new world. Since the spirit who was there to protect this tree was also reborn, there were now two spirits in the world, made to protect the same tree.

But this new spirit did not have the power to release monsters. And the older spirit no longer had the tree it was born to protect.

This was the true cause behind everything.

Soon, the former spirit would awaken.

His aim was to use his subordinates, the Centurion, to exterminate those who had driven him to despair. Lloyd's mission was to stop him at all costs and find a new way to circulate Mana.

Normally, Lloyd would have overcome this challenge by working with the former comrades and friends he'd gained along the Journey of Regeneration. But this time, he could not allow it.

His opponent this time was the Spirit of the World Tree. And since this spirit had lost the tree it was supposed to protect, it would likely try to take over the new World Tree. There was only one way for the old spirit to take over the tree: it had to learn the tree's true name. The only ones who knew this were Lloyd and his friends. Were he to involve them in this situation, he could be putting the name of the tree in jeopardy of being discovered by the spirit.

All of this information had been passed on by Yuan, the appointed guardian of the World Tree. Lloyd had met him during the Journey of Regeneration. Initially they were at odds, but now Lloyd trusted him implicitly. Yuan asked Lloyd for his cooperation when he caught wind of the steadily approaching danger, and Lloyd of course couldn't refuse. And by bestowing a name to the World Tree, Lloyd was able to get the blessing of Martel. Only those who had received this blessing could see this through.

"I'm sorry, Noishe. But I need to do this on my own."

Noishe's ears lowered and he whined sadly. Lloyd smiled and pet him on the head reassuringly.

"Come on, don't be like that. I'll be all right! You know I'd never kick the bucket out there. Yuan will be here and I've got the spirit Martel on my side. There's no way I can fail. Sure, I'm all on my own, but I'm not really alone, you get me?"

Noishe snorted and rolled his eyes slightly. Even he knew there'd be no stopping Lloyd and just gave up protesting entirely. Noishe took the lead and Lloyd followed behind him with a wry smile on his face.

After walking through the forest for a time, they reached an opening near the bank of a creek. Lloyd's home, a quaint, two story house, stood there. His Dwarven adopted Father, Dirk, was

watering his garden when they arrived. Clenching a fist in mental preparation, Lloyd ran to meet him.

"Dad! I'm back!"

Dirk about dropped his watering can when Lloyd showed up.

"Lloyd?! Where on earth have you been wandering around?! Colette and your friends have been worried sick about you!"

"I'm sorry, Dad. There was someone that needed my help."

"You think that means you can disappear without even telling your old man?! And what about your friends?"

"I can't tell them. If I did, they'd get caught up in something way too dangerous. Even now it's the same situation, so I can't get into detail."

Dirk furrowed his brows and looked up at Lloyd. Dwarves are known for their strong build, but are significantly shorter than Humans. The more Lloyd grew, the more Dirk had to look up to see him.

"You're not doing anything that's gonna make trouble for folks out there, are ya?"

"No way!"

"You swear on my and your real Father's life?"

"Absolutely."

For a while, Dirk looked at Lloyd sternly, but chuckled softly to himself before long.

"You've grown up, my lad."

"Huh? You mean you're not angry at me?"

"You've grown taller, but I still know how to read you! You looked at me straight in the eye and didn't glance aside. That means you haven't done anything that would make me ashamed of you. I trust you, m'boy. Just do what you need to do."

That was just what Lloyd wanted to hear from his Father. He had long since admired his foster Father's sense of justice and disdain for anything that was not honest and forthright.

"Dad, I need to leave again soon. What I'm going to do is not easy, and I need to travel as light as possible. I'm going to leave Noishe here. Can you take care of him for me until I get back?"

Dirk nodded slowly.

"All right. Don't you worry. Just leave Noishe to me and give 'em hell out there!"

"I will. And I won't do anything that would let you or my friends down!"

Dirk slapped Lloyd's back as strongly as he could.

"Darn right you won't!"

Lloyd jumped up in pain and glowered at him.

"Jeez, that really smarts!"

"The hell you still hanging around here for? Aren't you in a hurry? If you hang around too long, Colette and the others are gonna find you!"

"You're right. I'll get going."

"Just promise me you'll be careful out there."

"I will," said Lloyd with a nod. He was about to head outside, than stopped in the middle of the doorway.

"But sometimes, I might have to get a little reckless."

Dirk took a step forward, his face grave. "Why do you have to go and do a thing like that? Why can't you just promise your old man you'll be careful?"

There was a long silence as Lloyd stood there, light from the open door pouring in. His shoulders began to twitch, and then before long he began chuckling audibly to himself. Dirk was about to go check on him, when Lloyd suddenly spun around, a playful smile on his face.

"I lied. I'll actually be careful."

Dirk banged his fist on the nearby table and rolled his eyes. "Damn it, Lloyd!" He spat, but Lloyd was already leaving. He waved farewell to Dirk on his way out and started heading back towards the forest.

As he left, Lloyd vowed he'd never look back. If he turned back now, all his resolve and courage would be for nothing. Just like Dirk told him, Lloyd needed to forge ahead and do what he had to. And one day, when it was all over, he would return to the village with his head held high.

Lloyd swore to himself, then and there, that he would complete his duty without fail. He would protect the world from the spirit… from the oncoming threat of Ratatosk.

To be continued in: Tales of Symphonia: *Dawn of the New World*

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